Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy, 2004-2014

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Abstract

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and its full-scale assault in 2022, researchers have found that Ukraine's national identity has become increasingly united and civic, with a growing number of Ukrainians switching to the Ukrainian language and supporting the country's European integration. Most of the research marked the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014 as a starting line for Ukraine's national identity consolidation and foreign policy changing to a clear pro-Western vector. Most of the research on pre-2014 Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy found that i) Ukraine was divided between a pro-European Ukrainian-speaking West and a pro-Russian Russophone Southeast; ii) the Ukrainian elite conducted either "multi-vector" or balanced foreign policy without committing to a pro-European vector and were driven mainly by short-term material gains or reactive towards external pressures from either the European Union or Russia.

In this thesis, I challenge all these assumptions. I argue that i) Ukraine's national identity consolidation and dedication to pro-Western foreign policy preference of both the general public and elites can be traced to early years since regaining independence; ii) pre-2014 Ukraine's domestic binary divide into a pro-European Ukrainian-speaking West and a pro-Russian Russophone Southeast was overemphasized as it was not meaningful enough to affect foreign policy; iii) Ukraine's elites conducted pro-Western foreign policy albeit hesitantly and gradually while their wayfinding toward the EU; iv) pre-2014 Ukraine's foreign policy was predominantly identity-driven rather than by mere material considerations.

Focusing on the period between 2004 and 2014, and contextualizing developments since 1994, I investigate how domestic meta-narratives of identity shaped Ukraine's foreign policy. Drawing on Societal Constructivism and post-colonial literary analysis, I analyze a range of primary sources, including novels, screen media, newspapers, and elite memoirs. I argue that popular narratives of identity in Ukraine were characterized by tension in different

dimensions. I identify key narrative tensions—between people and elites, *svidomi* and non-*svidomi*, reality and imposition, and Ukraine and its Others—that structured popular identity discourses. Elite narratives focused on national unity in diversity, overcoming the colonial past, and gradual wayfinding toward European integration. The interplay of these narratives, in turn, shaped Ukraine's foreign policy in ways still felt today.

This thesis moves beyond conventional East/West and pro-EU/pro-Russia binaries in foreign policy analysis. It offers a more nuanced, narrative-driven account of Ukraine's foreign policy development, demonstrating the importance of identity construction and internal dynamics over reactive or materially driven explanations. In doing so, it contributes to rethinking the role of smaller states in international relations and highlights the significance of narrative and identity in shaping foreign policy.

Acknowledgments

When I started my PhD late 2019, I had no idea what was ahead and how challenging it would be to finish. A global pandemic, full-scale invasion, relocation to the UK, and building my life from scratch for the third time in ten years contributed to the delayed submission. But, despite all these challenges, I was surrounded by love, support, and encouragement from countless people around me. I am extremely grateful to everyone who was with me throughout these years.

Due to various reasons, I have had seven PhD supervisors who contributed to my completion to different degrees. First, I would like to thank Gregory Moore, whose belief in me, my abilities, and my project got me into a PhD program in 2019. I extend my deepest gratitude to Bettina Renz, who has been with me during all the challenges I met along the way and whose guidance and support made my project happen. Without her constant encouragement and help, I would not have been able to get where I am today. Her character, wisdom, integrity, and kindness inspire me to continue in academia. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Bettina went above and beyond to help me relocate to the UK and gave shelter to my mother until we found her a permanent accommodation. I am eternally grateful for everything she has done for me.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, allegedly aiming to take over the country in three days (Harding, 2024). By the time of writing in spring 2025, it had failed. Russian military forces were met by a united front of Ukraine's army, society, and elites. On 27 February 2022, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, said that Ukraine "is one of us, and we want them in the European Union" (Mahon, 2022). On 28 February 2022, Ukraine applied for EU membership (European Commission, 2022).

While the 2022 Russian aggression—and Ukraine's firm response to it—might have sped up the formalization of Ukraine's pro-EU foreign policy and helped the EU to take Ukraine's aspirations seriously, Ukraine's pro-Western choice had little to do with the invasion from the East, especially considering that it had been in conflict with Russia for 8 years, following the annexation of Crimea and fighting in Donbas. Ukrainians did not wake up on the morning of 24 February feeling European. Ukraine's pro-European choice takes its roots earlier than that dreadful morning or even the events of 2014. Ukraine's pro-European choice is the fruit of decades-long domestic conversations about rediscovering its roots and navigating its path toward a better future that Ukrainians had since regaining their independence in 1991. It is a national story embroidered by the interplay of popular and elite narratives about national identity and foreign policy. This is what this thesis is about.

The introduction chapter consists of four sections. First, I will contextualize this research project. Second, I will provide a brief overview of Ukraine's foreign policy and the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war to justify the research puzzle for this research. Then, I will present the research puzzle for this dissertation to set further investigations. Lastly, I will conclude this introduction chapter with an outline of this thesis.

Project background

Due to its geographical location between Central Europe and Russia, Ukraine's[1]

foreign policy has tended to be coerced to choose sides between various international actors.

Historically, the contestation has been between Western actors[2] and Russia.[3] This split

seemed to remain remarkably stable despite the passage of time, which had ramifications for

both the seemingly apparent division in the national identity of Ukrainian people as in

Western Ukrainians and Eastern Ukrainians, as well as their preferences in foreign policy

being geographically inclined in favor of their immediate neighbor state.

Soon after regaining its independence in 1991, and until 2015, it seemed like

Ukraine's elites and ordinary people struggled to collectively determine and consistently

pursue the country's foreign policy. While the decade of Leonid Kuchma's presidency, from

1994 till the Orange Revolution in 2004, was characterized by a multi-vector orientation in its

foreign policy aiming to balance both geographic neighbors, domestically, the Ukrainian

people were talked about as sharply and meaningfully divided into the Russia-favoring

eastern region and the EU-favoring West (Shyrokykh, 2018) which seemed to confirm

theories in the literature about ethnic affiliations and nationalist movements (Gellner, 1983;

Gellner, 1987; Beissinger, 1996; Beissinger, 2002; Beissinger, 2005). The next decade

presented a much more serious and much deeper divide, in which the domestic conflict

manifested itself. The perceived polarization in Ukraine progressed drastically from 2004 to

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[1] The name "Ukraine" here refers to what has been traditionally associated with Kyiv Rus (879-1240), Cossack Hetmanate (1649–1764), Ukrainian National Republic (1917-1920), Ukrainian SSR (1919-1991), Ukrainian Republic (1991 onwards).

[2] "West" is used broadly here as an umbrella term for the different political entities that existed throughout history westwards of Kyiv Rus and modern Ukraine, such as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the EU, as well as non-geographically defined actors such as the USA, Canada, the UK, NATO, and other democratic political entities that are traditionally understood as the "West".

[3] Here "Russia" refers to the various state-like entities that existed throughout history eastwards of Kyiv Rus and modern Ukraine, and are traditionally associated with Russia, such as Muscovy (1480–1547), the Tsardom of Russia (1547–1721), the Russian Empire (1721– 1917), Russian SSR (1922–1991), and the Russian Federation (1992 onwards).

2014, culminating in the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014, which led to Russia's annexation of Crimea, intervention in Donbas, and the Ukrainian Parliament renouncing the country's non-aligned status (Reuters, 2014). In the years after the Euromaidan Revolution, this domestic dynamic changed to a clear, united, pro-Western vector, indicating a popular aspiration amongst Ukrainians to join both the EU and NATO (Walker, 2015; Ukrinform, 2019). In February 2019, when the Ukrainian Parliament voted to amend the constitution to formally affirm Ukraine's commitment to the EU and NATO paths, it sent a clear message that any union-like framework with Russia was not possible (Ukraine Constitution, 2019).

Despite the ostensible predictions, perspectives, and fears of this eventuality, Ukraine has not split into two countries—one joining Russia, and the other the EU—nor become a federation (Huntington, 1993; Sasse, 2001; Riabchuk, 2002; Connolly, 2010; Burger (2010); Sakwa, 2014; Putin, 2014; Averyanov, 2014; Hutchings and Szostek, 2015). Russia's attempts to create a new state of Novorossiya in the eastern and southern oblasts of Ukraine in the spring of 2014 miserably failed as pro-Russian protests in Odesa, Kharkiv, and other southern-eastern cities in 2014 were not supported by the population, and all provocations were dealt with effectively (Laruelle, 2016; O'Loughlin et al., 2017; Kuzio, 2019). Additionally, until February 2022, Russia did not intervene further than the territories of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) despite its military superiority over Ukraine's weakened army and the West's non-interference. Even in 2025, despite the ongoing full-scale invasion, Ukraine is neither fully invaded by Russia nor splitting into two separate countries. Ukraine has remained united and now, while fighting Russia on a large scale, is fully focused on pursuing membership in the EU and NATO, public support for which has been steadily growing, with the highest polls at 88% (pro-EU) and 86% (pro-NATO) in September 2024 (Razumkov Center,[4] 2024).

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[4] Razumkov Center is Ukraine's leading non-governmental public policy think tank, founded in Kyiv in 1994.

I will show in detail in the literature review that the dominant narratives about pre-2014 Ukraine and its foreign policy suggest that Ukrainian society was deeply divided domestically. Because of this division, Ukraine's foreign policy has not always been pro-Western but rather a mere act of the elite balancing between the West and Russia in search of a better short-term deal. In this thesis, I will challenge these two notions popular in academic research and politicians' discourses about pre-2014 Ukraine. One is about the meaningfulness of Ukraine's domestic binary divide into "Eastern" and "Western" Ukraine[5] based on the language, religion, and ethnicity. The other one is about the nature and driving forces of Ukraine's foreign policy as being elite-driven, balancing without a clear goal of joining the Western institutions.

I will argue that the ostensible binary divide within Ukrainian society before 2014, while perceptible, still was i) superficial and oversimplified due to the way researchers looked at the survey data without considering the intersubjectivity of Ukrainian society, and ii) was not meaningful to the degree it had been suggested as the main divide in pre-2014 Ukraine was between the people and elite rather than Ukrainians from the East and West, who had a lot more in common than it was thought before.

Regarding Ukraine's foreign policy before 2014, I will argue that i) ever since Ukraine regained independence, hesitantly, inconsistently, and gradually pro-European, and ii) it has been so due to the interplay of popular and elite narratives about Ukraine's national identity and preferable future, often despite the external pressure and cost-benefit rationalizations.

The central part of this project is discovering unifying popular meta-narratives shared by Ukrainians and the elite's complementing narratives about Ukraine's national identity and

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[5] Even the framings like 'Eastern' and 'Western Ukraine' suggest that Ukraine was divided into two meaningful areas. Using East of Ukraine or West or Ukraine is more appropriate, as such wording emphasizes geography rather than implying a strict cultural or political split.

foreign policy. In this research, I will assess Ukraine not just as a passive player responding to the EU-Russia conflicts of interest, as it is often portrayed in scholarly research, but rather as an active party making its own foreign policy choices that are not simply explained by tacit cost-benefit calculations but rather are shaping, and are shaped by, its identity by centering and examining voices of the Ukrainian popular and elite discourses.

The primary reason behind taking the 2004-2014 period as the main timeframe for this research lies in the key events that highlight shifts in Ukraine, such as the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014. Equally important, despite the two revolutions, this decade was a time of peace for Ukraine. It is not all that surprising that ever since the start of Russian aggression in 2014, the Ukrainians' attitudes toward Russia became progressively negative (Razumkov Center, 2016a, p. 13) and Ukrainians increasingly identified as less "Russian", and more Ukrainian (Arel, 2018) and more European (Razumkov Center, 2016b, p. 93). In this project, I want to look at how Ukraine's national identity evolution informed its foreign policy during a time of peace without the influence of any existential threat from outside that Russia has been presenting since 2014.

Before the War: Ukraine's foreign policy overview

To understand Ukraine's foreign policy from 2004 to 2014 better, it is vital to look at it in the context of its domestic dynamics and foreign policy from the decade prior. In 1994, Leonid Kuchma became the first elected President of independent Ukraine. The decade of Kuchma's presidency ended with the Orange Revolution in 2004 when pro-Western, pro-democratic Viktor Yushchenko was elected as the new President (Gretskiy, 2013).

Kuchma's influence over both Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies had been strong well past the end of his presidency as he was involved in the Trilateral Contact Group for the Minks Agreements (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2020). He inherited good

relations with Ukraine's neighbors, except for Russia and Romania (Kuizo, 1997, p. 185).

The phrase "multi-vector foreign policy" was invented during his first presidential term.

Shyrokykh (2018, p. 834) described Kuchma's "multi-vector policy" as a mixture of pro-

Russian rhetoric concurrent with pro-Western actual policies. While he did not pursue NATO

membership as the Baltic states did, he supported the Partnership for Peace program.[6]

Though he relied on the more pro-Russian Southeast of Ukraine's votes for re-election,

Kuchma did not pursue political and economic integration with Russia or the Commonwealth

of Independent States (Shyrokykh, 2018, pp. 833-35).

      While wanting to "normalize" relations with Russia, Kuchma was always cautious

about Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, even up to the degree of stating

that "If tomorrow Russia goes into the Crimea, no one will even raise an eyebrow" (Kuzio,

1997, pp. 220-222). Some scholars noted that pro-Russian domestic actors mostly supported

Ukraine's multi-vector policy, especially in the industrial East that depended on cheap

Russian gas (Razumkov Center, 2004, p.26). This multi-vector approach significantly

deepened the pre-existing divide between Ukraine's East and West (Shyrokykh, 2018). Such

a division seemed to be in line with Huntington's infamous hypothesis on a possible

civilizational clash inside of Ukraine, as suggested by different ethnic and cultural affiliations

and imaginations.

      The Orange Revolution of 2004 brought Ukraine Yushchenko, whose foreign policy

was seen as a departure from the previous multi-vector course of Kuchma (Kononenko, 2008,

p. 206). Gretskiy (2013, pp. 8-10) identified four key foreign policy priorities of Yushchenko:

closer integration with the EU, NATO membership, beneficial cooperation with Russia, and

WTO accession. While Yushchenko's ambitious rhetoric seemed like a rejection of the

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[6] The Partnership for Peace (PfP) is a NATO program launched in 1994 designed to foster enhanced military cooperation, interoperability, and democratic reform among NATO and non-member countries. More on PfP can be found here https://www.nato.int/cps/po/natohq/topics_50349.htm.

"multi-vector" foreign policy, it became clear that little was achieved in practice. Only one of the four grand priorities was fully implemented – Ukraine joined the WTO in 2008. There were some minor successes like Ukraine joining the EU's Eastern Partnership[7] and participating in several exercises with NATO, as well as pausing the Black Sea Fleet lease extension to Russia during the time Yushchenko was in office (Gretskiy, 2013, pp. 8-25). N. R. Smith (2016, p. 72) also argued that Yushchenko's policies were transient, and for the most part, Ukraine still had to maneuver between the two sides at the same time.

Yushchenko's few achievements were mostly reversed as soon as Viktor Yanukovych took over in 2010: NATO aspirations were taken off the agenda, Ukraine's non-alliance status was adopted, Russia received an extension for its Black Sea Fleet lease, and the Association Agreement with the European Union was paused, sparking peaceful protests in the fall of 2013. Yet, Yanukovych's policies were not categorized as entirely pro-Russian. Scholars like Smith (2016), Shyrokykh (2018), and others tended to view them as "multi-vector" as well. Kropatcheva (2011, pp. 532-535) noted that for many other states, a multi-vector policy was a natural choice, but, for Ukraine, it became a challenge because it turned into a tug-of-war, where leaning towards one of the two sides caused issues both domestically and internationally. While Gnedina (2015) and other scholars argued that a multi-vector foreign policy had often been an effective bargaining strategy to enable maneuvering and alleviate external pressure from the EU and Russia, it failed to explain further developments that led to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

During 2004-2014, Ukraine seemed to have pendulum swings in its foreign priorities: from the pro-Western rhetoric of Yushchenko to the assumed pro-Russian orientation of Yanukovych, and back again to a pro-Western vector headed by Petro Poroshenko. In 2010, Ukraine teetered from rhetorically pro-Western President Yushchenko to who was described

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[7] More on EaP can be found here https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en.

as openly pro-Russian President Yanukovych, who failed to balance influence from the EU and Russia and whose mishandling of the peaceful protests in late 2013 led to the violence during the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 (Sherr, 2013a; Shyrokykh, 2018). Several possible contributing factors to this fluctuation include incomplete state-building, opportunistic and populistic elites, divergence between Yanukovych's personal interests and people's wishes, and aspirations prompted by identity consolidation that peaked during the Euromaidan. In that same year, after Yanukovych fled to Russia, Ukraine faced Russia's intervention, Crimea's annexation, and the war in Donbas. Despite this, the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (EUAA) was signed on 27 June 2014.

Nonetheless, if previously Russia had forced Ukraine to adjust its foreign policy to be more in line with its interests through 'sticks and carrots' in the form of dialogue, economic sanctions, and financial support, after the Euromaidan revolution, Russia retaliated militarily to Ukraine's people and Parliament uniting in strong support for signing the EU Association Agreement. After Russia annexed Crimea and instigated war in the Donbas region, the EU applied targeted sanctions against Russia, and Russia retaliated with tit-for-tat sanctions against the EU (Zielenkova, 2016). However, as Renz and Smith (2016, p. 15) noted, "Russian behavior is not all about the economy and economic interests". On 25 November 2018, Russia escalated this conflict and further endangered peace in the region by attacking Ukrainian vessels in the Kerch Strait. This was done for both political and strategic reasons and has implications for the whole region (Razumkov Center, 2019). On 21 February 2022, eight years after the start of the war in Donbas, Vladimir Putin recognized the separatist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk. Three days later, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion.

When Ukraine's public and elites united towards the pro-European vector, there were multiple attempts inside Ukraine to undermine and challenge this choice during the so-called "Russian Spring," which lasted from the end of February to the beginning of May 2014. Opposing the Euromaidan and the new government after Yanukovych fled to Russia, pro-Russian protests and riots were happening in the Russophone territories in the South and East of Ukraine, which traditionally had closer ties with Russia, higher public support for joining the Eurasian Customs Union, and least favored joining the EU and NATO. Riots, armed insurgencies, occupation of administrative buildings, and covert operations by the Russian Federation were launched to pursue a union with Russia, federalize Ukraine, launch referendums on the status of the Southeast of Ukraine, establish Russian as a second official language, and create a new Novorossiya state (Laruelle, 2016; O'Loughlin et al., 2017). This Russian Spring resulted in Russia annexing Crimea, the civil conflict in Donbas escalating into a war with more than 10,000 casualties before 2022, and, with Russia's support, the formation of the so-called internationally unrecognized Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. But the ambitious Novorossiya project to split Ukraine into two states failed as pro-Russian protests were matched and mostly outnumbered (except for Sevastopol, Donetsk, and Luhansk) by pro-Ukrainian counter-protests, mainly due to the failed proposals of the Kharkiv and Odesa "People's Republics" (Kuzio, 2019).

In 2016, Smith (pp. 153-155) outlined three potential scenarios of the crisis' outcome. The best-case (albeit unrealistic) scenario included Ukraine's integration into NATO and the EU without retaliation from Russia. Should the worst-case scenario unfold, a new Cold War or even real war might erupt between the West and Russia, and Ukraine might lose even more of its territory to Russia. The more likely scenario proposed that Ukraine would become a buffer between the EU and Russia, following the Finlandization approach proposed by Brzezinski and Kissinger (Smith, 2016, pp. 153-159). Others, following Huntington's ill-

reputed and challenged proposition (Fox, 2005), speculated that the country may still

formally split into Western and Eastern regions, with the Western portion joining the EU and

NATO (Deo, 2014; Penkova, 2014; Embury-Dennis, 2019). As of early 2025, Ukraine has

lost about 20% of its territory to Russia (Institute for the Study of War, 2025), consequently,

Russia is still under heavy sanctions from the EU and US. While some say, this is a new cold

war (Abrams, 2022; Hirsh, 2022), others disagree (Smith, 2022; Kimmage, 2024). It may

seem like Smith's worst-case scenario is at play, but, at the time of writing in the spring of

2025, it was still too early to make any definite conclusions as Ukraine had not surrendered

nor disintegrated, but was united, and continued fighting for its sovereignty. Such

determination and unity between the people of Ukraine and its elite should puzzle those who

made various claims about Ukraine's politics and future.

Research puzzle

This thesis is driven by the research puzzle that explores why Ukraine has remained

united and pursued a pro-European foreign policy despite the ongoing existential war,

extreme external pressure from Russia, and, starting in spring 2025, from the second Trump

administration, the ostensibly polarized national identity of pre-2014 Ukraine, and

historically presumed division within the country.

The Russian Spring of 2014 was not the first attempt to create Novorossiya in

Ukraine. Back in 2004, during the Orange Revolution and after Yanukovych lost the election

to Yushchenko, a group of representatives from the Putin Administration, the Russian

Parliament, and other high-level officials led by the then-mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov,

attended unconstitutional meetings and anti-Yushchenko protests in Ukrainian

Severodonetsk. They proclaimed the creation of a new independent Southeast Ukraine

republic with future incorporation into the Russian Federation (Chekalenko and Fedunyak,

2010, p. 131). Unfortunately, this experience did not teach Ukraine's leadership to prepare for war and modernize its army at the time. The Russian army was modernized by 2014 and was in a better condition than in 2004 (Renz, 2016, p. 30). With not much response from the West during the first failed Novorossiya attempt in Ukraine, as well as the war with Georgia in 2008, in theory Russia could have either created Novorossiya in the Southeast of Ukraine or even taken over the whole country. But despite Russia's military and economic superiority over Ukraine and Ukraine's presumed divided identity, the Novorossiya project failed again, and before the full-scale invasion, Ukraine had only lost Crimea and 2.7% of the Donbas territory (MFA of Ukraine, 2019).

As was pointed out above, a significant amount of previous research and concerns raised by some Western and Russian politicians speculated that Ukraine would either split into two countries or would entirely be taken over by Russia. The divided national identity of Ukraine indeed seemed to support this. The split of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia and the reunification of Germany may serve as empirical examples that go in line with the identity-focused approaches and theories such as constructivism, primarily, and neoclassical realism to some degree. Many scholars have argued that national identity is important during nation- and state-building, even if it seems to operate differently in different contexts as well as informing domestic and foreign policy (Danforth, 1993; Sekulic et al., 1994; Holy, 1996; Hilde, 1999; Wilmer, 2004; Brockmann, 2006; Vlachova and Rehakova, 2009; Braat and Corduwener, 2019).

In this thesis, I will follow Ted Hopf's argument that a state's national identity informs its foreign policy. Hopf claimed the Soviet Union's self-perceptions and understanding of its identity influenced and were reflected in its foreign policy (Hopf, 2002). My conceptualization of national identity will be generally counterintuitive to the essentialist

views on identity and what constitutes it.[8] Thus, this research puzzle drove me to investigate Ukraine's identity beyond the simplistic interpretations of the empirical evidence that demonstrates Ukraine as a deeply divided country by language, ethnicity, religion, and culture. In this thesis, I will argue that while these are important and commonsense components for any national identity, they are not the decisive or ultimate factors that account for the country's self-perception and, consequently, its foreign policy. I will propose to conceptualize national identity as a narrative and process with its meta-themes and ongoing conversations that drive the trajectory of foreign policy.

At the international level, with the decline of United States hegemony, especially under the second Trump administration, the rise of the BRICS[9] countries, and the strengthening EU, the world is steadily entering multipolarity,[10] which can create challenges for smaller states around the globe to choose sides in a more complex and competitive environment (Amin, 2013; Laïdi, 2014; Smith, 2016; Pieterse, 2017). The inter-state competition between strong powers in shared neighborhoods could intensify the identity contestation happening in smaller states located in those neighborhoods, which, in turn, may lead to a range of outcomes, from countries switching sides to civil wars and the splitting of the countries, to countries becoming federations (Friedberg, 1993; Cornell, 2005; Cooper and Flemes, 2013; Mankoff, 2014). By changing perspective from big power politics and centering smaller states' voices, such as Ukraine, it is possible to obtain a more nuanced and decolonized representation of what is happening and why.

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[8] More on this in Chapter 3.

[9] BRICS is a block of major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, UAE, and Indonesia.

[10] N. R. Smith (2016b) calls this form of multipolarity—interpolarity and suggests that this has implications for contestation between states in the regions where the spheres of influence of strong powers overlap.

Thesis outline

Following this introduction, this thesis will consist of seven chapters. In the next chapter, I will review the major academic debates about Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy before 2014, highlight gaps, position my research within these conversations, and state my research questions. In Chapter 3, I will present the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological frameworks that I used to answer the research questions of the thesis. In Chapter 4, I will contextualize the decade between the two Revolutions by looking at Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy dynamics from 1994 to 2004. This chapter will also serve as a sample of what will come next as I will engage with the popular and elite narratives about Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will reconstruct popular and elite narratives on national identity and foreign policy from 2004 to 2014. I will focus on the predominant unifying themes within Ukraine's society and the complementary visions of Yushchenko and Yanukovych. In Chapter 7, I will present my reinterpretation of Ukraine's foreign policy from 2004 to 2014 through the lens of the interplay of popular and elite narratives about Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy, concluding that Ukraine's foreign policy of that time was driven by domestic dialogue and the quest for its identity within the European family of states.

Chapter 2. Literature Review and Research Gap

In the following literature review, I summarize the main conversations and debates relevant to the topic of this thesis. I critically reflect on prevailing trends in the existing scholarship by analyzing selected works in depth. Through this analysis, I position my research in relation to these debates. This section highlights key debates first in the Anglophone literature, then in the scholarship written in Ukrainian and Russian, focusing on findings from research on Ukraine's foreign policy and national identity.

There are three main reasons why I engaged with the scholarship written in Ukrainian and Russian. First, I wanted to contextualize my research within a broader academic setting that includes non-English-language contributions. Second, I wanted to give credit, voice, and critique to the research that was not published in English. Lastly, considering my own positionality,[11] it was important for me to reflect on how researchers' backgrounds may have informed the research on my topic in the past. Having engaged with academic conversations across the three languages, I can suggest that works originally written in Ukrainian or Russian tended to be more politicized and biased in their perspectives, often framing the issue as a political rather than a political science problem. In contrast, research published in English generally appeared more critical in its evaluations and analytical in its approach. This can be potentially explained by different peer-review processes for publications as well as varying degrees of academic freedom in the West, Ukraine, and Russia. However, a researcher's background—whether consciously or unconsciously—still influenced the conclusions drawn and data interpreted, regardless of the language of publication. Additionally, a tendency toward blame-shifting was found across all languages.

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[11] I discuss my positionality in detail in Chapter 3.

In the following section, I first contextualize my research project within the post-2014 and post-2022 research on Ukraine. Then, I present key debates in research on Ukrainian national identity from 1994 to 2004 and 2004 to 2014, and then key debates in the research on Ukraine's foreign policy during those decades. I approach the literature by the themes of national identity followed by foreign policy, each structured in chronological order, to emphasize the intricate connection between national identity and foreign policy, and to highlight how the research on Ukraine has evolved over time. I evaluate the contributions of previous studies, focusing on those that best exemplify these trends and position my thesis within these academic conversations.

A Note on Research Trends Post-2014 and 2022

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022 prompted a growing interest in research on Ukraine, especially on its national identity and foreign policy. Before 2013, only 78 results on Google.Scholars refer to Ukraine's national identity. Between 2013 and 2022, about 2,060 results are on Ukrainian national identity, and about 1,150 results after 2022. As for Ukraine's foreign policy, before 2013, there were about 360 results; between 2013 and 2022, there were about 780 results; and after 2022, there were about 817 results. Acknowledging this spike in research on Ukraine and addressing the changes in approaches and perspectives it brought is important.
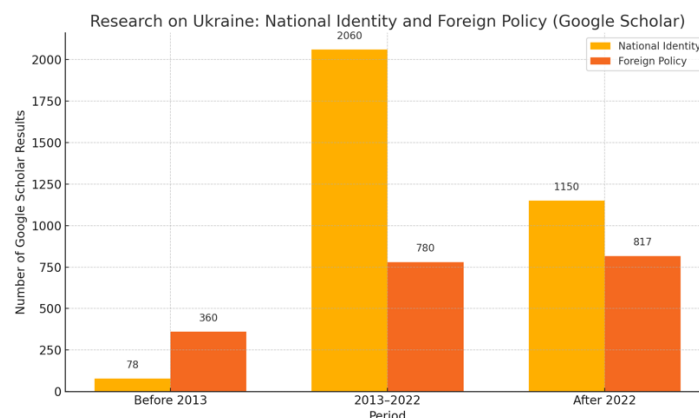
There are two noticeable trends in the post-2014 and especially post-2022 research on Ukraine. First, there is a growing body of literature that looks at developments and changes in Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy in the context of Russian aggression and war (Kuzio, 2015; Kulyk, 2016; Pop-Eleches and Graeme, 2018; Mankoff, 2022; Onuch, 2022; Onuch and Hale, 2022; Chachashvili-Bolotin, 2023; Wilson, 2024; Kulyk, 2024). Those who study Ukraine post-2014 find that Ukraine's national identity has become more united, civic, and more distinct from Russia, and Ukraine's foreign policy has undoubtedly become pro-European and pro-NATO, being supported by both elites and the public. These perceived changes in both Ukraine's national identity and its foreign policy, however, are discussed within the military aggression and existential war between Ukraine and Russia. There are two issues with such research. Firstly, it inadvertently presents Ukrainians' choice of becoming less "Russian" and Ukraine's choice of pro-Western foreign policy as sudden and underappreciates previous domestic dialogues on these issues in Ukraine. Secondly, focusing only on the post-2014 and post-2022 events reduces Ukraine's agency to reactionary to the military pressure from Russia. It does not acknowledge the steady, incremental changes in Ukraine's domestic dynamics since regaining independence in 1991.

It is not surprising that in the context of the war, most Ukrainians would not want to be categorized as of Russian descent or background and would want to switch to the Ukrainian language, especially given Putin's claims to liberate Russian speakers in Ukraine (RIA, 2022), and would want to protect themselves and their state within the EU and NATO frameworks. In this thesis, I focus on Ukraine's domestic narratives before 2014, when Ukraine was not at war with Russia and its domestic dynamic was not accelerated by external factors and existential war. I will argue that Ukraine's national identity was not reactionary to the external threat from Russia but rather had been progressively becoming united, civic, and more Ukrainian (that is distinct from Russian) early since regaining independence during the

time of peace. I will argue that Ukraine's choice of pro-Western foreign policy was not a sharp change in the elites but rather a cumulative process of pursuing a European future driven by the interplay of elite and public narratives around Ukraine's national identity.

The second trend of research on post-2014 Ukraine applies constructivist and decolonial approaches retrospectively to the events before and after 2014 and argues that Ukraine's national identity has been shifting towards pro-European in the time between the two Revolutions (Gerasimov and Mogilner, 2015; Riabchuk, 2015; Rewakowicz, 2017; Viera-Ramos and Liubyva, 2020; Kulyk, 2021; Riabchuk, 2021; Kulyk, 2023). This approach recognizes the overlaps in Ukraine's diverse national identity, suggests that Ukraine's society was less divided than it had been thought before, and argues that there has been a gradual change in people's self-perceptions in the process of decolonization and growth of civil society that was able to influence the state's policies. Such retrospective application of decolonial approaches to studying Ukraine is useful as it provides more nuanced insights into Ukraine's national identity. In this thesis, I propose that such retrospective and decolonial analysis of Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy is also helpful in our understanding of the decade preceding the Orange Revolution.

That said, it is important to position my project vis-à-vis post-2014 and post-2022 research on Ukraine. Firstly, this project aims to look at Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy, focusing on the decade between the Revolutions when Ukraine was not under the external threat Russia had presented since 2014. The goal here is to identify, analyze, and interpret Ukraine's domestic narratives about its identity during times of peace and not in the context of the war.

Secondly, I strongly reject the notion that Ukrainians and Ukraine became decisively pro-European on the morning of February 24, 2022. While the full-scale invasion indeed accelerated Ukraine's EU candidate application and spiked up nationwide support for NATO,

I will argue that it took decades for Ukrainians to rediscover themselves and confidently place themselves within Europe and for Ukraine as a state to find its way to the EU in the incremental, evolving, and hesitant, yet undoubtedly pro-European foreign policy. By looking at Ukraine's domestic dynamic in the time of peace, that is, before 2014, I will argue that both Ukraine's national identity and pro-European foreign policy were born through the interplay of domestic elite and popular narratives, that is, both Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy not are products of reactionary and emotional responses to the war with Russia, but rather are rooted in and are natural outcomes of people-driven quest for their identity and future.

Thirdly, as this project started in 2019, I cannot say that I am building on the post-2022 decolonial research on Ukraine. However, I will contribute to this approach's findings on Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy before 2014. Thus, while supporting the second strand of post-2022 research on Ukraine, considering the aims of this project and its consequent time frames, I will mainly engage with and respond to the research on Ukraine conducted before 2014.

Key Debates on Ukraine's National Identity, 1994-2004

On the fifth anniversary of Ukrainian Independence, President Kuchma proudly and hopefully said, "This event of great significance stands alongside only a few other historical dates that will transform the populace into a nation and the territory into a state" (Kuzio, 1998a, p. v). Renz (2016, p. 17) noted that many former Soviet countries became more resistant to Russia's influence by constructing their own distinct national and state identities. However, while realizing the importance of nation-building in Ukraine, Kuchma's nation-building policy was not particularly defined or implemented during his two terms (Kuzio, 1998b).

In 1992, Mykola Riabchuk posited the binary conceptualization of identities in Ukraine. Ten years later, in 2002, he published a sequel to his original article titled "Ukraine: One State, Two Countries?" and said, "As the author who introduced the concept of "two Ukraines" in 1992, I do recognize its ambiguity and the fact that it may explain and clarify as much as it confuses and obscures" (Riabchuk, 2002). Nevertheless, following Riabchuk's conceptualization, multiple studies (Kuzio, 1998a; Proedrou, 2010; Delwaide, 2011; Riabchuk, 2012; Dostál and Jelen, 2015; Rozenberg, 2015) showed similar findings about the divided nature of Ukraine's national identity, objectively noting the main trends and tendencies that divided Ukraine into the Russophone southeast and Ukrainian-speaking western part of the country.

There was a visibly sharp divide in terms of cultural associations, shared history, and preferred foreign policy orientation: western Ukrainians cherish the UIA,[12] and its leader Stepan Bandera, perceived Russia as a threat, and expressed the highest levels of support for EU and NATO integration. Whereas Ukrainians from the southeast were said to perceive Russia as a brotherly nation, took pride in their shared Soviet past, were less excited about the EU integration, and showed relative support for joining a union with Russia and other post-Soviet states (Kuzio, 1998a; Proedrou, 2010; Delwaide, 2011).

Such division, apart from historically defined factors, was best explained by Ukrainian researcher Makar:

> [This factor] displays the colossal immaturity of Ukrainian society, which was formed, as a matter of fact, not as Ukrainian, but as Soviet, where every citizen had to think first about his family and then about himself. Ever since [re]gaining Independence, at all levels, we are talking about the national idea, about the national interest, but in fact nothing has been done in the direction of consolidating society, defining national interests and implementing them.

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[12] The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukrainian: UPA) was a decentralized Ukrainian nationalist partisan formation founded by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) during World War II. While the OUN's declared goal was to establish an independent Ukrainian state and the UIA fought both the Soviets and the Nazis, they were also responsible for massacres of ethnic minorities. The legacy of the UIA is controversial and contested: some regard them as freedom fighters, while others label them as war criminals and Nazi collaborators.

> Moreover, from election to election—parliamentary or presidential—political forces fighting each other for power are increasingly arousing passions, without thinking about the fact that they are destroying society, the state, turning it into a laughingstock in the international arena (Makar, 2008, p. 192).

Ukrainian politicians wasted their opportunity to consolidate society in the decade since regaining independence. They abused the lingering divisive issues inherited from the Soviet era, such as the language question or national heroes, to win elections and stay in power at the expense of the further polarization in the society, as discussed more in the empirical chapters. In academic work, both Western and Ukrainian, such a binary perception of Ukraine into Western and Southeastern remained unchallenged until a decade later.

Andrew Wilson offered an interpretation of a 1997 survey[13] on issues like ethnicity and language. He proposed that Ukraine was a state of dual or situational identities and "an emphatically bilingual country" (Wilson, 2002, pp. 32-34). This conclusion in itself, while objectively reasonable, did not answer questions regarding Ukrainians' civic unity. However, he argued against identity boundary makers such as ethnicity or *jus sanguinus* and combinations of language and ethnicity. He delved into the subthemes of language and argued that "the criteria for defining patterns of language use are complex and the end results hardly definitive" (Wilson, 2002, p.34). He went beyond "objective" questions about native tongue and argued that more subjective parameters could shed light on Ukrainians' identity based on preference of use, fluency, competency, and circumstantial usage. This, however, is insufficient as it fails to account for the intersubjective reality of Ukrainian society, in which interlocutors often spoke Russian and Ukrainian interchangeably, without perceiving one another as domestic "others"—thus rendering language differences largely meaningless.

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[13] One of the largest nationally representative surveys ever carried out in Ukraine (December 1997, all oblasts, N=10,211).

In 1998, Wilson conducted his own survey on Ukraine's national identity and asked 1,741 Ukrainians, 'What makes someone a Ukrainian?'. He suggested that support for a rigid or exclusivist model of Ukrainian identity was minimal as only 3.9% defined identity based on language, and a larger, yet still minority group (22.7%) identified with the concept of identity-based on *jus sanguinis*. He acknowledged that, in contrast, a majority (57.7%) favored more flexible and inclusive definitions, such as citizenship or a personal sense of being Ukrainian (Wilson, 2002, p. 44).

Wilson did not give this sufficient attention or emphasize its importance. In his own survey, in addition to 17.3% of respondents who chose 'Citizenship of the Ukrainian state,' 40.4% answered 'Consciousness of oneself as a Ukrainian' and 4.9% 'Consciousness of Ukraine's separate history' as to what makes someone Ukrainian. Wilson's research (2002) did not investigate nor interpret these responses further and argued that "Ukraine remains an amorphous society with a weak sense of national identity that has considerable capacity to resist the logic of consolidating statehood" (Wilson, 2002, p. 31). This is a crucial oversight and misinterpretation. Most of those surveyed not only preferred a flexible and inclusive definition of national identity, but they also prioritized the importance of self-awareness and consciousness. While Wilson deemed the lack of a strong national identity and inclusivity as something negative, I interpret Ukrainians' social ambivalence as one of the key markers of their national identity and inclusivity as the strength that kept the society together. In this thesis, I will argue that Ukrainians' growing self-awareness was one of the most important identity narratives that has implications for the nation's foreign policy.

Wilson (2002, p. 51) overlooked his own findings and concluded that "overlapping identities may resist the logic of consolidating statehood and of Russia's limited practical engagement with Ukraine". The nationwide events of the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions, and especially the civic unity of Ukrainians and their response to the 2022

Russian invasion, disproved Wilson's conclusion. His study is a great example of how Ukraine's identity was both studied and seen at that time. Most of the previous research descriptively focused on objective divisive parameters such as ethnicity, language of daily use, contested historical myths, and so on, misinterpreted the subjective, and neglected to attribute importance to intersubjective factors of Ukrainians' self-identification. No surveys asked whether it mattered to Ukrainians what language their interlocular spoke, what ethnicity they were, or what religion they affiliated with. By doing so, the research failed to investigate the meaningfulness of the data collected during surveys and thus only contributed to creating an image of a divided Ukraine based on purely statistical characteristics such as language, ethnicity, and religion.

In this thesis, I argue that the perception of the strict and meaningful divide between West/East of Ukraine is simplistic and superficial, as it does not go along with the events of the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions or the events after them. In this thesis, I follow Wilson's flexible and inclusive view of Ukraine's national identity and aim to go beyond the "subjective" factors into intersubjective unifying narratives of Ukrainians' national identity. Additionally, while acknowledging the commonly held perception of stratification in Ukraine's national identity, I reject the significance often attributed to these domestic differences and their impact on foreign policy. In this research, I find such differences to be largely descriptive rather than substantively meaningful, challenging earlier assumptions about their influence. Moreover, in this thesis I propose to perceive Ukraine's identity as being a wholistic, non-binary spectrum, constantly evolving on a continuum, leaning closer to the pro-European end, and, despite the real and substantial differences within itself, being a distinct Ukrainian identity that has shared values and preferred norms.

Key Debates on Ukraine's National Identity, 2004-2014

One of the most famous Yushchenko campaign ads ran as follows:

> Think Ukrainian. You are a descendant of the equals to the Apostles: Princess Olha, Vladymyr the Great, Yaroslav the Wise. History demands from you to believe in yourself and in Ukraine. Think Ukrainian (Yushchenko, 2006).

Yushchenko's passion and aspirations to renew the Ukrainian nation gave hope to a renewed dominant position for Ukrainophile discourse in Ukrainian society (Kuzio, 2006a, p. 409). President Yushchenko continually identified Ukraine as a "European" country, never once placing it within "Eurasia" (Kuzio, 2006b, pp. 89–108). Ukrainian historian Anatoliy Halchynskyi perceived the events of the fall of 2004 as

> a manifestation of the classical social revolution in its content, which is undoubtedly a logical continuation of the profound social transformations that began in 1991. In the end, the goals of 1991 and the goals of 2004 are identical. They have the same genetics and are associated not only with the establishment of Ukraine as an independent sovereign state, but also with the radical restructuring of the whole complex of social relations, the integration of our country into modern civilized development (Halchynskyi, 2005, p. 5).

Halchynskyi's observations about the continuity between the events of 1991 and the Orange Revolution can also be extended to the events of late 2013. This highlights the processual nature of Ukrainian national identity and foreign policy, suggesting a long-term, ongoing process in Ukraine's journey that can be traced through the decades following independence.

Karina V. Korostelina (2013) took an essentialist perspective of national identity, emphasized the language polarization (p. 298), and concluded that there was a major divide in Ukraine,

> not between Russians and Ukrainians but between the West and East of Ukraine. These regions have different histories, shared experiences, and moral values; these were developed in fundamentally different state structures and empires for centuries and thus have divergent geopolitical vectors of development and assessments of the past. This divide deepened after the Orange Revolution and is likely to persist for decades to come. People often believe that the divide in Ukraine is sharpened and manipulated by politicians, but the society is truly divided (Korostelina, p. 297).

This is an example of how Ukraine's domestic dynamic was misunderstood and misinterpreted by some academics. Written from an imperialist perspective, Korostelina—

despite being born and raised in Crimea, Ukraine (Carrillo, 2024)—undermined the

significance of imposed values and cultures and denied the survivalist resilience of the

Ukrainian people. She advocated for a static, binary understanding of Ukraine's national

identity and defended politicians who instrumentalized the inherited divisions rooted in the

country's colonial past.

Kropatcheva (2011, p. 523) found another categorical division within Ukraine as

divided both regionally, and between the majority of the population and the majority of

intellectual elites – the traditional West-East split, with the overall majority of the

population[14] being more loyal to the pro-Russian vector, while the intellectual elites favored a

pro-European orientation. Tarnavsky (2018) confirmed Kropatcheva's conclusions and made

an even further contribution to the study of the divided identity of Ukraine. He highlighted

that the primary influencing factors were the levels of awareness about Ukraine's pro-EU

vector (the less people knew, the more skeptical they were), level of education (the higher the

level of education, the less skeptical they were), and gender and age (older people and

women tended to be more skeptical of the EU). While these findings contributed to a better

understanding of the distribution of support for pro-European integration, their foci were still

on the divisive factors and did not incorporate critical perspectives on these issues, and thus

cannot answer why Ukraine did not split but remained united, since before 2022[15] the number

of educated people, along with the number of women and older Ukrainians, remained

relatively the same.

Yanukovych did not have a clear identity policy, as he focused on the economy and

miscalculated the people's interests, discourse, and the pro-European vector (Dragneva and

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[14] The southeast of Ukraine is much denser than the rest of the country, especially the industrial Donbas, which, for historical yet often unjust reasons, had more in common with Russia and Russian culture, so such findings are unsurprising.
[15] 6.9 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded globally (as of February 2025). https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/

Wolczuk, 2015). Redzyuk (2017), overviewing the history of the youth-led organizations and civil society that influenced the pro-European vector, identified three main vectors: pro-Russian, pro-European, and nationalistic. After the events of 2004, there was systemic work on raising awareness and spreading information on EU and NATO integration, encouraging the switch from "multi-vector" to the pro-European vector.

Under Yanukovych, there was a decline in democratization processes and increased pro-Russian propaganda (Redzyuk, 2017, p. 96). Euromaidan was said to have united pro-European and nationalistic groups. Redzyuk concluded that constant changes in the ruling class and changes in domestic and foreign policy undermined the development and growth of civil organizations of different orientations. Still, despite the authoritative regime of Yanukovych, the Euromaidan occurred. In this thesis, I argue that the public discourse clashed with that of the government in November 2013 when Yanukovych suddenly did not sign the EU Association Agreement, and people demanded change in government and foreign policy preferences. As Pryjdun (2019, p. 260) concluded, the Russian intervention in Ukraine crushed the remnants of the Soviet identity of Ukrainians and the myth of "friendship of two brotherly peoples" in 2014.

The popular perception in the academic literature of a domestically divided Ukraine introduced in the previous decade was challenged in this decade's academic discourse on regionality in Ukraine. Rogers (2007, p. 232) retrospectively deconstructed notions of "Western" and "Eastern Ukraine" and argued that "that owing to the diversity of historical legacies of many regions of modern-day Ukraine, regionalism is a far more complex phenomenon, than a simple, dichotomous 'west-east' divide" and suggested that "Ukraine's unique form of regionalism should be understood in terms of difference and diversity, rather than divisions". Sasse (2010, p. 105) noted the positive side of Ukraine's regional diversity and proposed that regionalism had played a crucial role in protecting Ukraine from

radicalism, whether nationalist, liberal, or authoritarian. Khmelko et al. (2011, pp. 103-104) while acknowledging the significance of the widely debated regional distinctions between the West, East, and South of Ukraine and their influence on Ukrainian politics, argued that the primary divide was between financial groups within Ukraine rather than between Ukrainian and Russian ethnic groups.

In 2015, Riabchuk, the father of "Two Ukraines," retrospectively rejected his own simplified conceptualization by clarifying that the main divide in Ukraine was "ideological— between two different types of Ukrainian identity: non/anti-Soviet and post/neo-Soviet, 'European' and 'East Slavonic'" that transcended linguistic, ethnic, and religious divides (Riabchuk, 2015, p.138). However, he attributed Ukrainians' unification to the external threat Russia poses. In this thesis, I follow Roger's framing of Ukraine being diverse rather than divided. I highlight the positive attributes of Ukraine's diversity and argue that the divide in pre-2014 Ukraine was between the people and elites rather than ethnic or linguistic groups. At the same time, I argue that despite an ideological divide in pre-2014 Ukraine, the nation had been more united than divided. Such dynamic preceded the events of 2014 and 2022, and it was there not because of the external threat of Russia but rather despite of it and due to the process of Ukraine's decolonization (Plokhy, 2018, p. 124).

Another strand of more recent research has a different focus and found more uniting aspects in Ukrainian identity. For example, Kotovska (2017) highlighted two unifying factors that influenced the Ukrainian national identity. The main unifying factor in the formation of Ukrainian identity was patriotism (41%), while in 2013, this factor was indicated by only 8% of the population of Ukraine. She, however, acknowledged significant regional differences. In Donbas, the patriotism factor was the lowest in Ukraine (17.5%), while the main unifying factor was the shared hardships of life (34.9%).

Another research group led by Anne Applebaum and Peter Pomerantsev also found unifying factors across the country. According to the LSE Arena report "*From Memory Wars to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine*" (2020, p. 74), Ukrainians across the country, irrespective of their political affiliation, were united by their shared experiences, traumas, and search for security. The researchers acknowledged Ukraine's multi-layered history and noted that the public was resistant to top-down narratives, which try to impose a "correct" discourse; and while elites drove domestic polarization, the public at large was more nuanced. While these studies were groundbreaking, there were some issues with how Pomerantsev interpreted the findings. He emphasized that people in big cities in the West of Ukraine had similar values and preferences as those in the urbanized East, and people from western rural areas shared similar attitudes as their rural counterparts in Donbas and South. Similarities in worldview and attitudes towards minorities in rural areas versus urban centers are commonly true about any other country, not just in Ukraine (Scala and Johnson, 2017; Huijsmans et al., 2021).

In this research I question the conclusions based on urban versus rural similarities across the country as they alone were not enough for Ukraine to stay united and pursue pro-Western foreign policy. In this thesis, I build on Applebaum and Pomerantsev's findings that the public was resistant to the elite narratives and imposed culture wars. I follow the direction of this strand of research that focuses on the unifying factors and undertake the task of discovering and examining narratively more substantial factors in the formation of the Ukrainian national identity.

Key Debates on Ukraine's Foreign Policy, 1994-2004

There is consensus in the abundant literature written in English that the Kuchma decade's foreign policy was characterized as multi-vector. Kuchma's main goal was to "normalize" relations with Russia while still getting closer to the West (Kuizo, 1997; Shyrokykh, 2018; D'Anieri, 2019).

As for the rationale behind Ukraine's preference for multi-vector foreign policy in this decade, one prevailing strand of the existing literature primarily focused on the cost-benefit calculations by Ukraine's elites, domestic politics, and weak civil society in Ukraine (Sherr, 1998; Wolczuk, 2003; Puglisi, 2008; Hryshko, 2010; Kravets, 2011; D'Anieri, 2012). One of the common traits of this decade that the researchers noted was Ukraine's foreign policy's declarative nature and "rent-seeking" instead of implementing structural changes and adjusting domestic policies to make the country fit for European integration. At the same time, the Ukrainian elites were seen to be the driving force for foreign policy agenda and implementation. Ukrainian society was perceived to be divided and uncertain about the foreign policy vector and thus could not have pressured the elites to pursue this declared pro-European policy. Some scholars, such as Smith (2016), argued that Ukraine's multi-vector orientation became a foundation of its foreign policy driven by cost-benefit factors even after the Kuchma era, which showed the indecisiveness, complexity, and changeability of Ukraine's preferences and affinities. Researchers such as Aslund (1999), Puglisi (2008), and others emphasized the role of the oligarchs and the ruling class's economic interests and desire to maintain the status quo in explaining why Ukraine's elites were not eager to implement reforms to align Ukraine's pro-European aspirations and declarations with the country's economy, trade, and legislature.

The main problem with the abovementioned studies and findings is that they ignored the context in which the Ukrainian state had been developing. Such conclusions did not

consider that Kuchma's decade was the early stage of Ukraine's state- and nation-building. As the country had just left the Soviet Union after 70 years of de-Ukrainization, people were confused about their national identity and power, let alone foreign policy issues. As for the elites, their perceptions of other institutions as similarly bureaucratic and declarative were arguably appropriate for the time, given their decades of experience within the authoritarian and bureaucratic structures of the Soviet Union, as well as the immense task of rebuilding the Ukrainian state from the ground up (Kuzio, 2002; D'Anieri, 2019).

However, it is erroneous to conclude that society was divided to the degree that it could not pressure the elites to make changes. The overwhelming majority of the country, 92.3%, including Crimea, voted to leave the USSR (D'Anieri, 2019, p. 34). There was a Donbas-originated miners' strike in 1993[16] that united more than 1.5 million people protesting nationwide in Kyiv, Donetsk, and other big cities, which led to snap presidential and parliamentary elections in 1994. In 1996, yet another Donbas-led miner strike was supported by their counterparts from Lviv (Kravchenko, 2015). The nationwide Kuchmagate protests in 2000[17] were a wake-up call for the Ukrainian people, revealing "the stark contradictions between the declared and virtual worlds of Ukrainian politics" (Kuzio, 2001, p. 1). This row of public dissatisfaction with the elites and the actual results that the protests brought into Ukraine's politics signaled to the public that change was possible and simultaneously inspired the growth of the civil society in Ukraine and exposed the public's constant demand for the renewal of the elite. As much as there might have been a division among the people of Ukraine, I argue that there still was a unity that produced domestic changes at a level appropriate for the time despite its low direct engagement with and influence on foreign policy during this decade (Redzyuk, 2017).

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[16] This was the largest protest in independent Ukraine before the Orange Revolution in 2004.
[17] The Kuchmagate protests in 2000 erupted after the release of secret recordings implicating President Leonid Kuchma in the disappearance of journalist Georgiy Gongadze, sparking public outrage over corruption and abuse of power.

Another strand in the relevant literature addressed the multi-vector policy of Ukraine as an intentionally chosen orientation since Russia was perceived as a threat and needed to be dealt with care, given the close proximity with Russia (Roeder, 1997; Balmaceda, 2000; Kubicek, 2009). However, this argument fails to explain why Ukraine did not distance itself from Russia's orbit and only deepened its dependency on Russia's energy supplies. Ukraine did not achieve closer cooperation with the EU and NATO, unlike the former Soviet Baltic states. Despite not signing any binding agreements, Ukraine actively participated in military and economic negotiations within the Commonwealth of Independent States. Kuzio (1998a, p. 130) noted that Kuchma, while wanting to "normalize" the relationship with Russia, envisioned Ukraine as a 'bridge' not a 'buffer.' He failed, however, primarily due to the contradictory policy prescriptions and preoccupation with state-building as opposed to nation-building, again, unlike the Baltic states that took the opportunity to move away from Russia's world and intentionally focused on rebuilding their nations as distinctly non-Russian (Dostál and Jelen, 2015).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had better economic and military capabilities than the Baltic[18] states combined. The Baltic countries shared the same fear of Russia, yet they reacted to the fear differently and arrived at outcomes different from those of Ukraine.[19] In this thesis, I argue that attempting to pursue the pro-European vector without sufficiently intentional nation-building policies during the Kuchma era, combined with citizens' low self-awareness of their national identity and the politician-driven polarizing of the West and East of Ukraine, led to slow changes and hesitations in pro-Western policy

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[18] According to The Global Firepower (2025), Ukraine's military capabilities, even as weak as they were compared to Russia, were better than those of the Baltics. According to The Global Economy, Ukraine's GDP in 1991 was 77.46 bln USD, while the Baltics combined amounted to around 23 mln USD; however, Ukraine's military spending in per cent of GDP was half that of the Baltics, which suggests that the Baltics made it their priority to modernize, unlike Ukraine.

[19] The Baltics did not join even the loosely structured and non-binding CIS, thus indicating a strong and unified decision toward pro-European integration.

implementation. As a result, Kuchma had to opt for so-called "multi-vector" foreign policy, or like, Vidnyansky (2018, p.16) puts it, "constructive hesitancy."

The third strand in the research on Ukraine's foreign policy, mainly in more recent studies, however, proposed to explain Ukraine's multi-vector diplomacy and has found that ideational factors were involved to some degree (Kuzio, 1998b; Proedrou, 2010; Delwaide, 2011; Riabchuk, 2012; Dostál and Jelen, 2015; Rozenberg, 2015). These studies highlighted the importance of Ukraine's perceived divided national identity, challenges of de-russification, decolonization, and Ukraine's post-communism transition. The focus and argument of these and similar studies were on the divisive issues within Ukraine's society and elites when it came to the questions of language, ethnic minorities, and shared history and culture with Russia.

The arguments emphasized in the abovementioned studies, as accurate as they may be, primarily present static flashbacks to Ukraine's Soviet heritage. They are still insufficient in explaining the dynamic changes in Ukraine's identity during that decade that led to the Orange Revolution of 2004. The empirical findings reflected attributed divisions within the society but did not examine the elite and public discourses regarding Ukraine's identity and foreign policy and their differences. While cultural and linguistic discrepancies, as well as seemingly polarized national identity, might have deteriorated the pace of Ukraine's departure from the Soviet past and ties with Russia, unlike the Baltics, the finality and meaningfulness of such conclusions are not useful for a better and nuanced understanding of Ukraine's politics. The Orange Revolution, as failed as some may think it was (Vidnyansky, 2018, p.12), still showed significant consolidation within Ukrainian society, high demand to fight corruption, and a preference for the pro-Western vector (Plokhy, 2018, pp. 113-114).

Ukrainian-language literature concerned with the 1994–2004 period offered distinct perspectives on the aforementioned debates and conversations that are worth highlighting.

One of the noticeable approaches used in the Ukrainian language scholarship analyzed Ukraine's foreign policy within a civilizational discourse, emphasizing the civilizational crossroads at which Ukraine is located (Vidnyansky and Martynov, 2006; Aleksiievets and Seko, 2009; Vidnyansky, 2011; Aleksiievets and Pryjdun, 2012). It also focused on different competing conceptualizations for Ukraine's foreign policy and the geographically suggested divisions among Ukrainian society. These researchers viewed Ukraine's foreign policy as an ongoing evolutionary development with a pro-European end, unlike Western literature, which primarily branded Kuchma's foreign policy as a closed-end multi-vector policy.

Others, however, acknowledged the inadequacies and inconsistencies in Ukraine's elite and society's preferences in foreign policy during this decade. Makar (2008) argued that low consolidation of civil society, little understanding of what people wanted in terms of future development as a nation, and lack of self-awareness of their national identity by each citizen and as a whole nation contributed to Ukraine's inability to formulate and conduct its foreign policy during the Kuchma's decade. As he further explained, Ukraine being under foreign rule for centuries created an inferiority complex and disbelief that Ukrainians could build their own sovereign nation-state (Makar, 2008, p. 190). Budkin (2011) also noted that inner contestation of the preferred vector systematically destabilized the country's ability to consistently pursue its foreign objectives, leading to distrust between Ukraine and its eastern and western neighbors. This further contributed to Ukraine's perceived practice of pretense rather than actual steps in either direction.

Overall, two common yet non-convincing features of Ukrainian scholarship have emerged. First was the overemphasis on mere lists of laws and regulations concerning Ukraine's foreign policy and cooperation yet lacking acknowledgment of their populist and declarative nature (Aleksiievets and Seko, 2009; Budkin, 2011). The second issue laid in considering establishing and developing bilateral relations as key achievements in this

decade. However, it ignored elite and popular narratives (Vidnyansky and Martynov, 2006; Vidnyansky, 2011; Aleksiievets and Pryjdun, 2012). Considering the civilizational aspect of Ukraine's geopolitical location, contesting identities and discourses within Ukraine, and the issue of consolidated national identity is important and can be one way of looking at Ukraine's foreign policy shifts. However, politicizing of the research, victimizing of Ukraine's past, and non-critical conclusions are not helpful in a more nuanced attempt to reconstruct Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy narratives.

Relevant research in Russia showed different conclusions to the similar debates outlined above. More coherent and less politicized research conducted by Romashchenko in 2012 presented the factors that influenced the choice of the multi-vector policy under Kuchma, emphasizing mainly Ukraine's geopolitical location between the two civilizations and at the crossroads of Europe and Russia's interests, Ukraine's inner heterogeneity with three areas (East being pro-Russian, West being pro-EU, and Central being hesitant), and the issue of the civilizational and national identity of Ukraine. In her view, Kuchma's multi-vector policy was declarative in nature without much substantial action. Research on Ukrainian foreign policy between 1994-2004 published after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 was distinctly blame-shifting. For instance, Batsa (2017) concluded that Kuchma's multi-vector policy was inevitable due to the EU's and NATO's refusal to integrate Ukraine into their structures quickly. Babenko (2017), on the other hand, emphasized that the inconsistent and contradictory foreign policy of Ukraine's leadership that tried to balance between the EU and Russia, ignoring the country's national interests, had the potential to be mutually beneficial but declarative in its nature. Kuchma's multi-vector approach was shortsighted and was only successful due to Russia's weak regional strategy at the time. Levchenkov (2020) added that the vacuum that appeared after 1991 and Russia's lack of a clear foreign policy strategy in the region motivated the USA and NATO to become more

active and provocative in Eastern Europe. According to him, Kuchma cooperated more with NATO than with Russia. Levchenkov concluded that all Ukrainian presidents' policies were always pro-EU and pro-NATO. This contradicts reality, as even Petro Poroshenko only supported this idea after being elected in 2014 and after the spike in public support of NATO following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas (Kuzio, 2015, p. 435), and under Yanukovych Ukraine's NATO membership was ruled out completely.

After overviewing the literature for this decade written in the Russian language, it became clear that it provided some additional contributions to the current research, such as affirming the pro-European aspirations of Kuchma despite his declarative rhetoric, as well as acknowledging the importance of Ukraine's location between the two civilizations and Ukraine's division into three areas (West, Central, and East) as opposed to most other research, which only considered the West and East of Ukraine. However, there was less agreement about the reasons for Kuchma's multi-vector policy, and ideational factors were not the focus of the abovementioned studies. At the same time, there was a sharp inclination towards research being instrumentalized by pro-Kremlin bias and empirical data and findings being treated as political issues rather than political science problems.

Key Debates on Ukraine's Foreign Policy, 2004-2014

The following decade is often described as a swinging pendulum in Ukraine's foreign policy orientation. The Orange Revolution of 2004 replaced "multi-vector" Kuchma with clearly pro-Western-rhetoric Yushchenko, who lost reelection in 2010 to pro-Russian or "balancing" Yanukovych (Bozhko, 2011). In February of 2014, during the Euromaidan Revolution, he had to flee, and pro-Western Poroshenko was elected in the first round of the elections.

When it comes to the attempts to explain the swings in this decade in Ukraine's foreign policy, most scholars, again, tended to imply that these swings were based on cost-benefit calculations (Melnykovska and Schweickert, 2008; Dimitrova and Dragneva, 2009; Gretskiy, 2013; Gnedina, 2015; Tolstrup, 2009; Tolstrup, 2015; Way, 2015; Risse and Babayan, 2015). A significant amount of research characterized Ukraine's foreign policy choices as balancing, bargaining, bandwagoning, or hedging in the light of the EU-Russia competition in the shared neighborhood (Proedrou, 2010; Gnedina, 2015; Smith, 2016; Smith, 2020). Ukraine was viewed as simply trying to balance between the two greater powers to get the best deal regarding trade, energy, and general cooperation.

The main arguments made in most of the abovementioned studies appealed to the economic reasons, trade, and Ukraine's energy dependency on Russia when explaining Ukraine's foreign policy choices and the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014.[20] Notwithstanding the important contributions to the literature, this approach and the findings it brought to light are inconsistent with the purposes of this research, which aims to explain the role Ukraine's national identity played in the country's foreign policy. The importance of cost-benefit calculations in any country's policymaking process is tacit, as all states act according to their perceived national interests.

Another important flaw of this approach is that it, inadvertently or otherwise, treated Ukraine as an object rather than a sovereign actor in international relations. Such realpolitik predisposition limits the data used for research, de-emphasizes Ukraine's agency in making its own foreign policy, and leads to preconceived conclusions. I argue that the developments

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[20] While these studies, alongside most of the studies on Ukraine-Russia relations before 2022 done in the West, referred to this as the Ukraine crisis, I purposefully refuse to frame it as a "Ukraine" crisis because such framing puts the blame on Ukraine rather than the aggressor state which is Russia. Additionally, the events that transpired in Crimea and Donbas were not just a crisis and should be acknowledged for what they were, which is war. One noticeable example of Western scholarship framing Russia's actions as war despite its title is the article by Paul Goble. See Goble, Paul. "Russian national identity and the Ukrainian crisis." Communist and Post-Communist Studies 49, no. 1 (2016): 37-43.

in Ukraine—most clearly reflected in the two pro-Western revolutions and the change of government under pressure from the people that led to Russia's interference and Crimea's annexation and instigating war in Donbas—suggest that there was something more to account for than mere rational calculation and risk-taking on either side. In 2014, Ukraine lost more than it had received cost-wise, as the EU did not give any promises on Ukraine's EU membership, and the EU was ambiguous about future cooperation (Trenin, 2014; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015). This suggests that Ukraine's national interests were beyond the material, and its foreign policy was driven by issues that surpassed the simplistic assumptions of realpolitik. If anything, Ukraine acted counterintuitively to and despite what the abovementioned studies claimed to have found.

Another strand of literature (D'Anieri, 2012; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015; Smith, 2016; Shyrokykh, 2018; D'Anieri, 2019) examined Ukraine's foreign policy choices through the prism of the EU-Ukraine-Russia trilateral relations from a neoclassical realist perspective, emphasizing regional structures, the regional security complex, and pressure from outside of Ukraine. Dragneva and Wolczuk (2015), while arguing that the economy and structures played decisive roles, still acknowledged Yanukovych's error. Namely, these scholars said that he did not have an identity policy in place, and in focusing on the economy, he miscalculated the people's interests and their pro-European discourse despite the public's division on integration preferences. They concluded that Yanukovych went for the economy and his own interests, while the people went for the identity, norms, and values attached to it (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015, pp.94-96). Smith (2016, pp. 7-27) mainly used identity as an intervening variable for analyzing the foreign policies of the EU and Russia; Ukraine's identity was not examined. He used changes in Ukraine's policy as an indicator of how competitive the EU and Russia's policies were in influencing Ukraine. D'Anieri (2019) refrained from assigning blame to either Russia or the EU. This contrasted with Mearsheimer

(2014), who blamed the collective West for wanting to get Ukraine out of Russia's orbit, and Wilson (2014), who blamed the EU for its weak and inept response to the Crimea annexation. D'Anieri further contributed to the literature by focusing on the interconnection of the international and domestic causes of Ukraine's foreign policy swings. He concluded that "the violent earthquake that took place in 2014 was the result of deep 'tectonic' forces as well as short-term triggers" rooted in profound normative disagreements and conflict of interests (D'Anieri, 2019, p. 2).

Despite the value of the above-stated approaches in providing a bigger picture of the region and the competition that has been developing there, they mainly perceived Ukraine's foreign policy as being elite-driven and reactive because they see Ukraine as situated in structural pressures from both the EU and Russia, and thus minimized both the agency of Ukraine as a sovereign state and the Ukrainian people as a policy-influencing body. These and similar studies can contribute to understanding the context in which Ukraine's national identity was formed and what external factors suggested changes in Ukraine's identity. However, these approaches and their underpinning assumptions about national identity do not provide a suitable framework for the research puzzle of this dissertation.

The third strand of relevant theoretically eclectic research focused on identity-driven factors and dynamics in the domestic-international continuum that influenced Ukraine's foreign policy (White, McAllister, and Feklyunina, 2010; Proedrou, 2010; Kropatcheva, 2011; Kuzio, 2015; Samokhvalov, 2015).

Kroparcheva (2011) followed the neoclassical realist assumption that domestic-level factors—such as perceptions, leadership, and internal political dynamics—affect how states respond to systemic pressures. She proposed that Ukraine's foreign policy depended on its national identity to a certain degree. She argued that Ukraine's divided identity affected its foreign policy choices, concluding that the split in Ukraine's identity made a multi-vector

foreign policy a requirement for domestic stability in 2010 following Yanukovych's victory (Kroparcheva, 2011, pp. 521-523).

Dominic Arel (2018, p. 188) also argued that "Southeastern Ukrainians are in fact divided over Russia, while Central-Western Ukrainians tend to be pro-EU en bloc". However, this approach came from the assumption that Ukraine's national identity was meaningfully divided, and it once again reduced Ukraine's foreign policy to a reactive type by treating Ukraine as an object of international relations rather than a sovereign actor.

Kuzio (2015, pp. 6-11) presented more of a historical narrative about the "seven cycles" of Ukraine's history and identity, clustering them into two alternative and alternate types: European/Europeanist (Ukrainophile) and Eurasianist (Russophile and Sovietophile). He did not explain any further how the identity influenced Ukraine's foreign policy choices. Kuzio (2015, pp.433-436) acknowledged that all of the main political parties and presidents before Poroshenko made only vague references to EU or NATO cooperation and were populistic in their foreign policy rhetoric and decisions. Even Poroshenko initially opposed NATO membership in Ukraine's two elections in 2014, but he changed his stance due to public support rising to over 50% (Kuzio, 2015, p. 435).

In response to the academic works of this strand, Joanna Fomina's report (2014) presented a cohesive debunking of the myth of divided Ukraine and Ukrainian's foreign policy preferences based on their language, ethnicity, or religion. She acknowledged that Ukrainian society was diverse in language, culture, attitudes, and opinions about the state's future. However, she further argued that explanations based on divisions along language preferences were oversimplified and misrepresented reality, imposing preconceived notions that were both unfair to Ukrainians and potentially harmful to the country's future. While Ukrainians may have disagreed on many issues, society did not consist of two monolithic or internally coherent cultural-political blocs (Fomina, 2014, p. 17).

While survey findings and descriptive conclusions may have portrayed Ukrainian identity as a relatively static spectrum—emphasizing polarization, domestic policy divisions, and voting preferences—they primarily highlighted surface-level tendencies within the country. However, these studies did not address deeper questions: what has consolidated Ukrainian society, what has united its people, what has held the country together thus far, or how elite and societal discourses have been reconciled in support of a pro-EU trajectory despite the ongoing war. Nor did these studies look at the possibility of Ukraine's national identity being fluid and inclusive, but rather, they framed the diversity of Ukraine's national identity as self-polarized, competing, and mutually exclusive and reinforced the notion of it being fixed. Moreover, such factors as different languages, issues between the titular ethnic group and minorities, and shared religion, history, and culture, notwithstanding being fundamental components and/or determinants of national identity, still were only visible, superficial attributes that did not produce division among the society to the degree that a collective identity ceased to exist. In this thesis, I argue that the traditional view of a binary, meaningfully divided Ukrainian identity—Ukrainian-speaking, Catholic, pro-EU Western and Central Ukraine versus Russophone, Orthodox, pro-Russian Southeastern Ukraine—is superficial, problematic, and simplistic, and, as such, does not answer the puzzle of the research or reflect the actual state of the country as it was before 2014.

The comprehensive work connecting Ukraine's national identity and its foreign policy done by White and Feklyunina (2014) provided more nuanced insights into Ukraine's domestic political landscape and its foreign policy preferences. Their approach differed from the ones mentioned above in several ways. Firstly, White and Feklyunina looked at Ukraine's domestic politics discursively and argued that "both the instrumental use of identity discourses and their deliberate vagueness are important factors in the process of identity transformation and that they can have a pronounced impact on foreign policy" (White and

Feklyunina, 2014, pp. 136-137). This was an important claim as it insisted on Ukraine's elites' intentionality behind their foreign policy instead of being simply reactionary to external pressures. It also noted that the vagueness of Ukraine's policies was deliberate and an important factor in the state's policies, not just the political indecisiveness of Ukrainian elites. In this thesis, I will argue that this deliberate vagueness provided much-needed space for Ukraine's internal dialogue on the issues of national identity and foreign policy preferences. Finally, this claim highlighted the *processuality* of Ukraine's identity transformation, which implies that Ukraine's identity was evolving, shaped by historical experiences, political contexts, and competing discourses, rather than being static as some argued before (Kropatcheva, 2011; Korostelina, 2013; Samokhvalov, 2015). I will further build on this assumption of Ukraine's identity being both dynamic spectrum and processual in nature.

Secondly, White and Feklyunina presented a cohesive spectral narrative of three main identity-driven discourses on Ukrainian elites' foreign policy preferences. The discourse of Ukraine as Europe aimed to distinguish Ukraine from Russia and emphasized European cultural and political values. On the opposite end of the spectrum was the discourse of Ukraine as Alternative Europe, which focused on East Slavic unity with Russia and Belarus, portraying Ukraine as part of a unique, morally superior Eastern Orthodox civilization. In the discourse of Ukraine as a part of Greater Europe, Ukraine was perceived as culturally linked to both Europe and Russia, yet distinct from them, belonging to neither the 'European' nor the Russian in-group of states. White and Feklyunina argued that the view that Ukraine, despite its cultural closeness to Russia, was becoming increasingly distinct from it gained growing popularity over the years of Ukraine's independence (White and Feklyunina, 2014, p. 142). Adopting such a spectral conceptualization of Ukraine's foreign policy helped to mitigate different approaches Ukraine's elite took over the years.

According to White and Feklyunina, Ukraine was not simply switching back and forth between the West and Russia but rather was navigating its way internationally in the context of an ongoing and shifting domestic debate on its identity. They argued that "Kuchma's articulation of Ukraine's identity increasingly emphasized its distinctness from its northern neighbor although in a manner considerably different from the 'European' discourse". Under Yushchenko, after the Orange Revolution, Kuchma's ambiguous discourse laid the ground for a "very strong European identification". Ukraine's official discourse returned to the 'Greater Europe' stance after Yanukovych's victory in 2010 (White and Feklyunina, 2014, pp. 144, 145, 159). Such discursive conceptualization better explains Ukraine's "remarkably consistent inconsistency" (White and Feklyunina, 2014, p. 136) foreign policy than simply framing it in pro-Western vs. pro-Russian vectors or in terms of balancing or multi-vectorism. In addition to the elite discourses, White and Feklyunina used survey data and focus group results to examine the prevailing identities and foreign policy orientations among the general public, and changes that took place over time. In this thesis, I argue that Ukraine's foreign policy, shaped not only by elites but more significantly by popular identity narratives, has demonstrated a paradox of inconsistent consistency in its pro-Western aspirations, predating the events of both 2014 and 2022. Building on the work of White and Feklyunina, who examined elite discourses on national identity and foreign policy, I expand the analysis by exploring how popular narratives intertwined with those of the elites, offering a deeper understanding of pre-war Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy preferences.

Research conducted in the Ukrainian language can be classified into two main groups: one blaming others for the failing foreign policy and the other one taking responsibility for this decade's developments. The first group (Gotsur, 2012; Tarnavsky, 2018; Vidnyansky, 2018; Hurak, 2019; Pryjdun, 2019) tended to blame the EU for not providing sufficient support after the Orange Revolution, when the people and President Yushchenko made their

pro-European choice. Hurak (2019) concluded that Ukraine reached only moderate success in European integration due to the EU's coldness towards Ukraine, the EU's internal struggles to stabilize after the 2004/'07 enlargement, and the EU's "Russia first" principle, and considered post the Orange Revolution times as windows of opportunity that Ukraine did not get to take advantage of.

Vidnyansky (2018) noted the European integration intentions of the Orange government rather than the actual steps toward it. He believed the Orange Revolution of 2004 failed because it left questions unanswered that were only resolved during the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014. The Orange Revolution brought populism that prevented systemic reforms and a clear preference for a European vector for foreign policy. Continued multi-vector foreign policy worsened EU-Ukraine relations and made European politicians very skeptical of Ukraine's prospects as an EU-member state. Vidnyansky blamed the EU and the USA for the low level of support after the Orange Revolution that helped Yanukovych get elected in 2010 and reverse the country from EU- to Russia-oriented policy. He romanticized Ukraine's ambitions about the EU, ending his research explicitly emphasizing that the EU needed Ukraine more than it realized (Vidnyansky, 2018, pp. 22-24)—a common leitmotif of Ukrainian populists. Beyond minimizing Ukraine's agency as both a nation and a state, such an approach also tends to romanticize Ukraine's significance to the West.

Tarnavsky (2018) saw Ukraine's elites as foreign policymaking agents and did not consider the public's discourse and demands. He stated that the Orange Revolution's important task was to raise awareness about Euro-integration, create positive attitudes towards the pro-EU vector, and promote the European identity of Ukrainians, implying a top-down perspective on the revolution of 2004. It was Yushchenko's government's fault for not taking the opportunity, allowing the Euroskeptics to win the parliamentary election in 2007 and the presidential election in 2010. Such an argument denied that the Orange Revolution

was people-led and that the people gave the new government a green light on the way to the pro-EU foreign policy, and not the other way around. Pryjdun (2019) explained that Yushchenko's foreign policy was declarative in nature, mainly due to the EU and NATO's unwillingness to anger Russia and partially due to Ukraine's domestic issues. This led to the Orange Revolution's defeat in 2010 and the consequent turn away from the pro-EU vector. However, Pryjdun perceived Yanukovych's foreign policy as pro-Russian in its essence (Pryjdun, 2019, p. 259) and not multi-vector, the perspective I reject in this dissertation. In this thesis, I argue that the EU treated Ukraine the way Ukraine treated Russia—open to cooperation but no membership unions or binding agreements; no close political ties but mutually beneficial economic and trade relations only (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015).

The other group (Budkin, 2011; Redzyuk, 2017; Kotovska, 2017; Kotsur, 2018) tended to focus on the mistakes Ukraine made in its domestic and foreign policies rather than trying to justify them at the expense of Russia and the West and primarily emphasized the passivity of Ukraine's civil society after the Orange Revolution and before 2013, which assisted Yanukovych in reversing the few pro-Western achievements Yushchenko had made. Budkin (2011, p. 5) highlighted that there was practically no public or elite resistance to Yanukovych eliminating the "Euro-Atlantic course" from Ukraine's main foreign policy program in 2010.

Research done by Kotovska (2017) presented an eclectic attempt to utilize several previously done studies on value change, national identity, and index of racial distance to analyze the influence of value change on the formation and development of Ukraine's foreign policy. In contrast to other more politicized research,[21] she critically noted the two coexisting yet mutually exclusive value systems: Soviet/Russian and national/European systems that

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[21] I maintain that most, if not all, political research is politicized to varying degrees. This is not to advocate for the possibility of objectively "true" research, but rather to underscore the importance of distinguishing between differing levels of politicization and outright government propaganda.

influenced foreign policy during this decade. Further, Kotovka stated that the revolutionary events of 2013-2014 proved that it was impossible to make important political decisions in foreign policy that contradicted the values of Ukrainians. Apart from this statement, while it might be true, there was no analysis of the contradictory discourses of the elites and the public, no clear connection made between the empirical data on Ukraine's national identity and Ukraine's foreign policy, and no acknowledgment of the apparent disparity within or fluidity of Ukraine's identity. I argue that despite the fundamental outward discrepancies in Ukraine's identity, there were still unifying narratives across the whole spectrum of national identity reproduced within Ukraine's inner dialogue on its identity. These identity narrative developments had the potential to influence Ukraine's foreign policy and had done so in 2004 and 2014. These unifying narratives of values and preferred foreign policy trajectories will be further discovered and examined in the empirical part of this dissertation.

The decade between the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions in Russian scholarship was highly politicized and biased. From Lysenkov's (2011) perspective, Yushchenko turned Ukraine away from multi-vector to the pro-EU vector in practice, which contradicted most of the previously overviewed literature that concluded that Yushchenko's pro-EU policy was declarative and not effective (Gretskiy, 2013; Gnedina, 2015; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015; Shyrokykh, 2018). Lysenkov (2011), however, highlighted the role of GUAM[22] in the beginning of the decade, Ukraine-Russia relations deteriorated as Ukraine tried to promote democracy in the region and be an alternative to Russia as peacemaker in the region. Others explicitly mocked both the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions. Romashchenko (2012) concluded that the "orange" revolution, nationalistic movements, and clear pro-Western vector destabilized Ukraine's society. Batsa (2017) perceived both the Orange and

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[22] The GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development is a regional organization of four states: Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, which Russia saw as an America-led alternative to the CIS.

Euromaidan Revolutions as stimulated and sponsored by the West, and thus unconstitutional, and at the same time, saw them as Russia's greatest foreign policy defeats. In his work, Yanukovych was perceived as pro-EU but against NATO. Surprisingly, he further concluded that Yanukovych did not consider the preferences of the southeast of Ukraine, which supposedly did not support the single pro-EU vector. This clearly contradicted the events of November 2013 when Yanukovych did not follow through with the EUAA and neglected what the rest of the country would have preferred. Babenko (2016, 2018) also mocked the Orange Revolution, called the Euromaidan Revolution a coup, blamed the elites for the Crimea annexation and loss of Donbas, and both Revolutions were described as being West-sponsored. He leveled unsubstantiated claims that the West financed the creation of the negative perception of Russia in Ukraine. He concluded that Yanukovych opposed the neo-Nazi movements in Ukraine,[23] but failed to normalize relations with Russia because he was rent-seeking for the best deal, and called Ukraine a terrorist state, Ukro-ISIS. Levchenkov (2020) used extremely derogatory language to ridicule the "orange" revolution and the "orange" president Yushchenko, denied Russia's interference in South Ossetia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea, and its intervention in Donbas, and did not mention the MH17 shooting down. Such politicized and biased perspectives and interpretation of findings are not useful in research as they do not contribute empirically, conceptually, or any other meaningful way. While assigning blame to either the West or Russia will not contribute to political science research, acknowledging Russia's responsibility for its actions in the region is important for academic integrity.

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[23] Indeed, during the Euromaidan Revolution, some ultra-right organizations were involved in protests. Still, they were small in number, and their candidates were not supported during both the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2014. The Right Sector only received 1.8% of the votes and did not overcome the 5% threshold to make it to the Verkhovna Rada, and the two far-right candidates Dmytro Yarosh and Oleh Tyahnybok only got 1.86% of votes combined, as opposed to Jewish Vadim Rabinovych from Odesa, with his 2.25% during the presidential election. Therefore, any accusations about alleged neo-Nazi movements in Ukraine do not stand their ground and only disqualify research that makes such claims.

Summary of the pre-2014 Debates

Research on Ukraine's national identity before 2014 revealed two conflicting arguments in the existing literature. Some perceived Ukraine's identity as being polarized and geographically divided into Eastern and Western areas by such issues as language, historical memory, shared culture, and religion. Other recent studies have found unifying factors that overcame the language and culture divide, such as shared values, norms, and preferred worldviews. However, they mainly focused on common traits in big cities vs. rural areas. This alone is not a strong claim, as such tendencies are true globally and arguably insufficient to impact foreign policy. I do not adopt the seemingly oversimplified first approach, as it neither contributes meaningfully to the existing literature nor provides useful insights for addressing the research questions of this thesis. I will contribute to the study of national identity, following and advancing the second approach that focuses on the unifying aspects of identity. By clarifying the research gap and answering the research questions outlined in the next section, I hope this study will provide a more nuanced reinterpretation of Ukraine's national identity and its impact on Ukraine's foreign policy before 2014.

The literature on Ukraine's foreign policy before 2014 was divided into two main perspectives: one viewed it as multi-vector—even under Yushchenko and Yanukovych—while the other saw it as alternating between pro-Western and multi-vector orientations. In this this thesis, I argue that Ukraine's foreign policy has gradually, though hesitantly, moved towards the EU and NATO, with elite rhetoric sometimes misaligned with both their actions and public sentiment until public pressure reshaped the discourse. Regarding Ukraine's identity, some scholars emphasized a geographic and cultural divide and correlated it to Ukraine's foreign policy switches. Others highlighted unifying values and norms, though these studies often focused on Ukraine's urban-rural and pan-regional dynamics without implications for Ukraine's foreign policy. In this thesis, I reject the simplistic notion of a

polarized identity and instead build on the unifying and discursive perspectives to explore how Ukraine's evolving national identity has influenced its foreign policy choices.

Concerning the driving force behind foreign policy, two main camps can be classified: those who prioritized cost-benefit calculations and regional competition between the two great powers—the EU and Russia—and thus minimized Ukraine's agency, and those who gave more acknowledgment to ideational factors. I will not argue against the tacit importance of cost-benefit calculations in a country's policymaking process. However, as the developments that led to the ongoing war suggest, there was something more than mere rational calculations and risk-taking on either side of the war. In this research, I will attempt to assess Ukraine not just as a passive player responding to the EU-Russia conflicts of interest, as it is often portrayed in scholarly research, but rather as an active party making its own foreign policy choices that are not simply explained by tacit cost-benefit calculations but rather are shaping, and are shaped by, its identity by examining the narratives of Ukraine's elites and public.

Research Gap

The literature review revealed that much of the pre-war research on Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy can be grouped into two main clusters. One portrayed Ukraine's foreign policy as reactive and driven by external pressures from competing regional powers, describing it as balancing or multi-vector due to cost-benefit calculations and disregarding any ideational factors. The other considered Ukraine's identity divided between competing Eastern (Russophone, Orthodox, pro-Russian) and Western (Ukrainian-speaking, Catholic, pro-European) perspectives. Except for very few, most proceeded to frame Ukraine's foreign policy, particularly under Kuchma and later Yanukovych, as a balancing or multi-vector due to the perceived Ukraine's domestic binary divide and emphasis on elite-driven pragmatism.

Ukraine's identity was either treated as a source of division or as static and binary, overlooking its dynamic evolution and unifying potential. There was limited analysis of how internal identity discourses—particularly those shaped by public and elite narratives—actively influenced Ukraine's foreign policy, especially during the critical decade between the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions. There are three main issues with both approaches:

1. Framing Ukraine's foreign policy as multi-vector or balancing (for either material or ideational reasons) did not explain Ukraine's pro-Western trajectory despite structural and material constraints and is inconsistent with Ukraine's unified response to the Russian aggression. There is a need to rethink and reconceptualize Ukraine's foreign policy before 2014 to better explain Ukraine's current developments.

2. The traditional presentation of pre-2014 Ukraine's national identity is inadequate as such studies failed to explain how Ukrainians have maintained internal coherence in foreign policy goals despite internal divisions, changing leadership, and war with Russia. While there is increasing recognition that shared experiences, narratives, and values (patriotism, collective trauma, and the pursuit of security) have fostered unity and resilience, the role of unifying identity narratives that transcend geographic and cultural divides, such as shared values and aspirations, in influencing foreign policy is understudied.

3. With few studies addressing how Ukraine's elite-driven identity discourse shaped its choices in foreign policy, the pre-2014 literature often depicted Ukraine as a passive reactionary object influenced by Russia-EU competition, thus failing to account for Ukraine's agency in shaping its foreign policy. The role of public discourse and civil society in shaping Ukraine's pre-war foreign policy trajectory is overlooked.

These gaps highlight the need to explore how pre-war Ukraine's evolving national identity narratives shaped Ukraine's foreign policy choices, enabling Ukraine to assert agency despite external pressures and the perceived binary divide.

Research Question(s)

The identified gaps above suggest the overarching research question for this thesis, which is how, despite external pressures and the domestic binary divide, Ukraine unitedly pursued pro-Western foreign policy.

To help answer this broader question, I develop three further sub-questions:

1. How did Ukraine's national identity narratives (both public and elite) evolve between 2004 and 2014, particularly in response to political crises and foreign policy shifts?

2. What unifying identity narratives shaped the direction of Ukraine's foreign policy goals during this period?

3. How did the interplay (alignment or tension) between elite and public identity narratives influence Ukraine's strategic foreign policy decisions, especially despite the context of EU-Russia competition?

Chapter 3. Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological Frameworks

The Euromaidan revolution of 2014 and the subsequent events leading to the Crimea annexation, the war in Donbas, and the full-scale invasion in February 2022 have led to a significant increase in academic interest and research on Ukraine and its neighbors. Before the commencement of Russian military aggression in 2014, a significant body of academic literature was written from a realpolitik perspective utilizing various theoretical frameworks that stem from Realism (Solodchenko and Sucher, 2005; Sherr, 2008; Abdelal, 2010; Smith, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014) that emphasized material factors behind Ukraine's foreign policy. However, as the literature review has shown, more recent studies have employed alternative theoretical lenses that accent ideational variables and aspects. Such research incorporated several theoretical perspectives, including neo-classical realism (D'Anieri, 2012; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015; Smith, 2016; D'Anieri, 2019), constructivism-inspired lenses (Delwaide, 2011; Riabchuk, 2012; White and Feklyunina, 2014; Dostál and Jelen, 2015; Rozenberg, 2015), civilizational discourse (Vidnyansky, 2011; L. Aleksiievets and Pryjdun, 2012), and theoretically and conceptually eclectic attempts (Proedrou, 2010; Kuzio, 2015; Kotovska, 2017).

In this chapter, I discuss concepts relevant to this study, theoretical framework and methodology that will guide this research project. Firstly, I will identify and operationalize the study's fundamental concepts that stem from the research puzzle and the research question. Secondly, I will review theoretical paradigms related to the above-identified concepts and determine which approach is the best fit for this thesis. Then, I will present a methodological framework for conducting this research as well as justification for the data selected for this research and particular methods used to analyze it. Finally, I will share some thoughts on my own positionality, its role, and significance for this research.

Concepts of the study

To answer this thesis' research question of how Ukraine, despite external pressures and presumably divided national identity, unitedly pursued a pro-Western foreign policy, I employed three auxiliary questions. These questions aimed to investigate deeper into Ukraine's national identity narratives (both public and elite), their evolution during the times of peace (2004-2014), and how their interplay influenced Ukraine's pro-European foreign policy goals and decisions, despite the context of EU-Russia competition.

As the research questions of this thesis focus on national identity and foreign policy, these two concepts need further clarification and a discussion on how they are used in this research. While foreign policy analysis is a reputable subfield of IR with its own tenets and established debates (Kaarbo, 2015), national identity as a concept remains contested as there are multitudes of conceptualizations and ways of studying it (Anderson, 1983; Habermas, 1990; Smith, 1991; Triandafyllidou, 1998; Smith, 2000; Eriksen, 2002; De Fina, 2003; Joseph, 2004; Guibernau, 2007; Hønneland, 2010; Lebow, 2012; Hopf, 1016; Anderson, 2020; Aguirresarobe, 2022). The same is true for the contested connection between national identity and foreign policy. In this section, I will present the ongoing debates about national identity as a concept and position the stance of this research on it, discuss the meanings of conceptual framings of Ukraine's foreign policy of the past, propose my own conceptualization for Ukraine's foreign policy from 2004 to 2014, and argue that national identity does, in fact, have an impact on a state's foreign policy.

National Identity

National identity is a key concept for this thesis as it studies Ukraine's national identity and its impact on Ukraine's foreign policy. There is no universally agreed-on definition of national identity. This vague and abstract notion is both intuitively understood and highly contested. Most of the academic debate about the concept of national identity deals with this notion's nature, content, and ways of studying it.

National identity: main debates

While there is a consensus that national identity is mainly shaped by shared history, culture, political system, and collective memory, there is a major difference in how scholars view this concept. Earlier works took an essentialist perspective and argued that national identity is deeply rooted in historical, ethnical, and cultural continuities rather than being modern social constructs (Geertz, 1973; Armstrong, 1982; Smith, 1986; Connor, 1994). Such primordialist arguments have been challenged in later, more modernist and constructivist research on national identity arguing that the essentialists overstated continuity and underestimated the role of modern political and social processes (Anderson, 1983; Smith, 1991; Triandafyllidou, 1998; De Fina, 2003; Joseph, 2004; Guibernau, 2007; Hønneland, 2010; Lebow, 2012; Hopf, 1016; Anderson, 2020; Aguirresarobe, 2022).

Academics of a more constructivist and critical strand view national identity as a social construct and discourse. Smith (1991, pp. 14-15) conceptualized national identity as "fundamentally multi-dimensional" composition of numerous interconnected components that "signify bonds of solidarity among members of communities united by shared memories, myths and traditions that may or may not find expression in states of their own". This framing of national identity as an analytical concept implies that it cannot be reduced to a

rigid or even quantifiable variable and highlights the space for shared solidarity of ordinary people that may or may not differ from those of the political elite. Smith further argued that

> [i]t is through a shared, unique culture that we are enabled to know 'who we are' in the contemporary world. By rediscovering that culture we 'rediscover' ourselves, the 'authentic self, or so it has appeared to many divided and disoriented individuals who have had to contend with the vast changes and uncertainties of the modern world (Smith, 1991, p. 17).

There are three insights from this argument that are important for this research. First, Smith tied the process of rediscovering a shared culture to rediscovering our own identities. The emphasized process of rediscovering supports the idea that national identity is socially constructed rather than just somehow inherited as essentialists tend to believe. Second, the phrase "divided and disoriented individuals" highlights how people may struggle with their identity in the face of modern challenges, and rediscovering and, by extension, reconstructing their roots can offer clarity and a stronger sense of self. Third, considering Ukraine's transitional period after independence and Ukrainians' experiences of "vast changes and uncertainties," it becomes even more apparent that engaging with shared, rather than divisive, elements is more likely to play a constitutive role in shaping Ukraine's national identity.

Lapid and Kratochwil (1996, p. 8) argued that "cultures and identities are emergent and constructed (rather than fixed and natural), contested and polymorphic (rather than unitary and singular), and interactive and process-like (rather than static and essence-like)". This conceptualization is appropriate to this project's aims and research questions as it highlights the constructed non-binary process of the intersubjective nature of national identity.

Many scholars argued that people and states can and do, in fact, have multiple collective identifications simultaneously and selectively engage one of them based on the appropriateness of time, place, context, and circumstances (Smith, 1991; Guibernau, 2007; Hønneland, 2010; Whitmarsh, 2011; Goff and Dunn, 2004; Hopf, 2016). This suggests that while Ukrainians in Luhansk and Lviv have strong regional identities, it does not prevent

them from having other collectively shared identifications that can come to the surface depending on circumstances.

Based on the conceptualizations I discuss below, and in line with a pluralistic understanding of national identity in lieu of a clear agreed-upon definition, in this thesis, I conceptualize national identity as a constructed, non-binary, and fluid spectrum—an interactional and dynamic narrative process of self-rediscovery, latent closeness, and evolving self-awareness.

National identity as 'felt closeness'

Guibernau (2007, p. 11) argued that national identity is "a collective sentiment based upon the belief of belonging to the same nation and of sharing most of the attributes that make it distinct from other nations. National identity is a modern phenomenon of a fluid and dynamic nature. While consciousness of forming a nation may remain constant for long periods of time, the elements upon which such a feeling is based may vary". Such framing of the concept of national identity as a feeling and of a fluid and dynamic nature helps a researcher to go beyond the static and binary view of national identity.

Guibernau suggested that national identity has five main dimensions: psychological, cultural, territorial, historical, and political. The psychological one is particularly interesting for this research as, according to the scholar:

> [it] arises from the *consciousness* of forming a group based on the '*felt'*
> *closeness* uniting those who belong to the nation. *Such closeness can remain*
> *latent for years and suddenly come to the surface whenever the nation is*
> *confronted with an external or internal enemy* – real, potential or imagined –
> *threatening its people, its prosperity, its traditions and culture, its territory, its*
> *international standing or its sovereignty* (Guibernau, 2007, p. 11).

This conceptualization presents national identity as such that can develop during a hidden long-term process of becoming united without any signs of bringing people together and possibly even showing signs of seeming divisions. However, when met with an existential

threat, it comes to life. This is exactly what happened in Ukraine in 2013 when the nation was met with the internal enemy in the persona of Yanukovych and then in 2014—its external enemy, that is, Russia, and then again in 2022 when Russia expanded its invasion onto the whole of Ukraine. Ukrainians' unified response to Yanukovych's U-turn on the EUAA deal, and once again to Russia, should not be seen as a surprise nor a starting point for Ukraine's national identity consolidation. In this thesis, I suggest that the unified response was the fruit of decades of underlying processes of the nation's identity that have roots in Ukrainians' becoming closer during the times of peace. This insight into national identity aligns with this research's aim to investigate concealed and understudied unifying elements of "felt closeness" within Ukraine's national identity that developed without being affected by an external enemy.

Guibernau (2007, p. 18) argued that while the national identity construction process "has to be compensated for by some bottom-up contributions," still "[u]ndoubtedly elites play an irreplaceable role in the construction of national identity, since they are better equipped, generally benefit from greater access to the media, and have an incomparable influence upon political institutions". The view that national identity narratives are constructed, popularized, and imposed by the elite onto the general public, seen as the recipients of and reactive to the official discourse, is neither new nor contested. Elites do have more established resources, structures, and means to control national identity narratives. However, such a theoretically predetermined perspective neglects the creative potential of the public and its agency.

Lebow (2012) challenged the notion that the construction of national identity and the development of related narratives are solely the domain of elites. According to Lebow, many non-intellectuals are as reflective and creative as their intellectual counterparts and do not rely on foundational principles to justify their actions. In fact, such individuals may be better equipped to navigate the uncertainties and tensions that come with recognizing the

multiplicity of identities and may be more at ease making ethical choices they consider right, even if those choices cannot be fully rationalized (Lebow, 2012, p. 10).

Applying a presupposed, top-down approach to studying national identity also leads to framing empirical findings independently of context and as derived from theoretical premises of the elite narratives superiority rather than letting the data to speak for itself (Hopf, 2012) and providing space for popular narratives. I do not subscribe to such a top-down perspective because it assumes the leading role of elite a priori, and teleologically, this thesis aims to prioritize attention to the much-under researched role of popular narratives about national identity and how they interact with those of the elite. Assigning the leading role of popular narratives to the conversation about Ukrainian national identity is a conscious choice, as such a perspective better aligns with the purposes of this thesis to investigate the interplay between popular and elite narratives and their impact on Ukraine's foreign policy.

National identity as a process

Another non-static and fluid conceptualization of national identity as a process was used by Anna De Fina, who investigated how immigrants identified themselves in the USA. She distinguished between 'identity' versus 'identities,' highlighting the multiplicity of socially available options and 'identification,' emphasizing the ongoing discursive process of identity construction as different frameworks for understanding what national identity is (De Fina, 2003, pp. 16-18). She concluded that a discourse-centered approach best captures the processual nature of identity formation. Because identity is a process, it is not fixed or predetermined by cultural traits, social class, or economic roles but is shaped by various contextual factors. Immigrants, in particular, constructed their identities dynamically, adjusting their narratives, roles, and relationships based on their audience and the context in which they were speaking (De Fina, 2003, pp. 224-225). In my research, I apply this

processual conceptualization of national identity to look into how Ukrainian national identity was constructed discursively and domestically rather than within a foreign context. The process aspect of national identity operationalizes identity narratives in Ukrainian identity evolution and allows for a possibility of collectiveness of national identity that goes beyond predetermined cultural traits that are ostensibly divisive.

Lebow adopted a distinctly processual understanding of identity, emphasizing its conceptual instability and questioning its analytical utility in social science. He argued that identity, like all concepts in social science, is a reification—something that "never refer[s] to anything real," and is therefore difficult to define or measure consistently (Lebow, 2012, p. 17). Because of this, he proposed replacing the term "identity" with "self-identification," which better reflects the subjective and constructed nature of how individuals understand themselves. Lebow went further to suggest that the "most fundamental problem with the concept of identity is that it describes something that has no ontological existence" (Lebow, 2012, p. 269). If identity is taken to mean "some coherent inner self that is relatively consistent over time," he contended, then individuals do not, in fact, possess such an identity—rendering non-processual conceptualizations analytically meaningless (Lebow, 2012, p. 270). In line with postmodernist thought, Lebow maintained that "existing identities are fragmented and fluid," shaped by both internal conflicts and tensions between individuals and the broader society (Lebow, 2012, p. 326).

This view aligns closely with the interpretivist and constructivist approach I adopt in this thesis. Rather than treating national identity as a fixed or measurable entity, I understand it as continuously negotiated through discourse, shaped by narrative, and contingent upon context. Lebow's critique emphasized the importance of studying identity not as a static category, but as an ongoing process of self-identification, embedded in broader social, political, and historical structures. This perspective is particularly relevant in the case of

Ukraine, where national identity has been contested, reframed, and re-narrated over time by both elites and the public, especially in relation to foreign policy. By focusing on narratives and how they reflect evolving understandings of identity, my research contributes to a more nuanced, de-essentialized view of national identity as a product of intersubjective meaning-making rather than as a stable characteristic of the state or its people.

Lebow presented a synthetic view of identity, suggesting that individuals do not possess a single, coherent identity but rather a range of roles and affiliations that shape their self-identifications. These self-identifications, whether embraced or resisted, form the basis of the narratives individuals construct to gain social acceptance and make sense of their lives. He emphasized the complex interaction between roles, affiliations, agency, and narrative, all of which are observable and open to empirical investigation (Lebow 2012, p. 38). What Lebow proposed is very much appropriate for this research. While I do not engage in the semantical debate over whether it is 'identity' or 'self-identification' as this is outside the scope of my research and I will use these terms interchangeably, his take on the complexity of national identity and interplay of various constitutive elements which can be observed and studied fits the purposes of this thesis. I will follow Lebow's perspective on the processuality, fluidity, multiplicity, and narrativity of identity. I propose that identity itself is a process, not just the process of identity construction. Such conceptualization highlights fluidity, complexity, interactivity, ongoingness, direction, and graduality.

As identity, or in Lebow and De Fina's words 'identification' is a process of tensions, conversations, and interactions between individuals and society, it can be argued to conceptualize national identity as narrative itself and not just treat narratives about identity as a part of it.

National identity as a narrative

Polkinghorne (1996) explored the relationship between narrative and the production of self-identity, arguing that narrative identity allows researchers to see not just the structural outline of a life story but also its substantive content. These contents are not isolated elements but are woven together into a coherent whole. Narrative, he suggested, has the capacity to unify and integrate diverse experiences and aspects of the self into a meaningful and cohesive identity (Polkinghorne, 1996, p. 364). Polkinghorne also argued that "cultures maintain and communicate their identity answers in storied form and that their members take in and retain them in storied form" (Polkinghorne, 1996, p. 365). Gergen argued that narratives "generate a sense of coherence and direction in our lives" (Gergen, 2005, p. 103). McAdams and McLean (2013) suggested that narrative identity weaves together people's reinterpreted past and envisioned future to bring a sense of coherence and direction to their lives. Conceptualizing identity as a narrative capable of unifying and integrating diverse components can contribute to a better understanding of it as it responds to the multiplicity and fragmentation of national identity.

Another important feature of identity as a narrative is its constitutive potential. Lebow argued that

> Individual and social identities are created, transmitted, revised, and undermined through narratives and practices. Narratives tell people who they are, what they should aspire to be and how they should relate to others. They are invariably linear, as they are structured around a plot line that imposes a progressive order on events, selecting and emphasizing those that can be made supportive of it (Lebow, 2012, p. 46).

This is not a novel idea, as McAdams argued in 2001 that individuals shape their identities by crafting narratives about their lives, which had gained traction as a widely unifying concept across both the humanities and social sciences. However, Lebow applied the creating capabilities of narratives beyond the individual to the concept of national identity, as he affirmed that "[i]dentity is a kind of bricolage that builds on life experiences, cues from

others and reflections on both. This is true for groups, institutions and countries, not only individuals" (Lebow, 2012, p. 49). According to Lebow, the constitutive effect that narratives have on national identity is intersubjective as it abides by people's self-identifications and interactions with each other based on the perceptions these narratives created. The idea of "progressive order" also aligns with the conceptualization of national identity as a process and "latent closeness" that can suddenly surface.

Hønneland (2010) similarly argued that identity narratives are not merely descriptive or reflective accounts, but they actively contribute to the creation and evolution of identity itself. He emphasized that "narratives—that is, the stories people tell—are not just reflections about the world but rather constitutive of the self," thus granting narratives an ontological as well as an epistemological dimension (Hønneland, 2010, p. 6). In this view, narratives do not simply express who people are to the outside world—they also play a formative role in shaping who people become. He further affirmed that narratives are seldom entirely self-created. As Gergen (2001, p. 249) argued, individuals do not independently author their lives; rather, the stories they draw upon are shared cultural resources that they use to shape their personal life narratives.

McAdams and McLean (2013) extended the constitutive view of narrative identity by emphasizing that storytelling is a universal human practice, present across all cultures—from traditional folk tales to contemporary reality TV. They argued that individuals also construct and share personal stories, drawing on specific life episodes to create meaning. Through this process, people develop what psychologists termed narrative identity—an evolving and integrative life story that reconstructs the autobiographical past while envisioning the future. This narrative provides a sense of unity, purpose, and meaning, synthesizing past experiences with future aspirations. In doing so, individuals use narrative identity to express to themselves and others who they are, how they became that way, and where they believe their

lives are headed (McAdams and McLean, 2013, p. 233). This perspective on identity as narrative is particularly useful for this thesis, as I will focus on popular literature and movies to reconstruct popular narratives about pre-2014 Ukraine's popular identity. As will be shown in empirical chapters, the Ukrainian public and elite were very invested in the issues of the past and future and navigating the uncertain present. I argue that identity itself is a narrative, not just a narrative about national identity, that should be paid attention to as narrative identity encompasses both embracing lived experiences narration and narratively creating people's present or desired future intersubjective reality.

As demonstrated in my brief overview of the different conceptualizations of national identity, scholars highlighted a range of elements and functions, making it clear that there is no single, universally accepted definition. In this thesis, I do not seek to reinvent national identity as a concept. Instead, I recognize that while there is no clear concept, there are still shared constructivist underpinnings that allow for taking a pluralistic approach that looks at national identity from multiple angles. For this research, I draw on multiple constructivist understandings of national identity, which share an epistemological foundation, and I take a pluralistic approach that looks at national identity construction from multiple angles used in constructivist research.

National Identity and Foreign Policy

In this thesis, foreign policy is understood broadly as both the declared objectives of a state's political elites and their practical interactions with other states or actors. While there are various components that inform a nation's foreign policy in all its complexity, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how identity narratives within Ukrainian society informed Ukraine's foreign policy before 2014. Specifically, the thesis is interested in how the interplay of popular and elite narratives, both competing and complementing, contributed

to shaping discourse and decision-making. Scholars working within critical and constructivist paradigms widely accept that national identity plays a central role in shaping foreign policy.

Prizel (1998, p. 19) contended that "national identity serves not only as a primary link between the individual and society, but between a society and the world". In his view, national identity is an important factor for both domestic and foreign policies. Similarly, Lebow (2012, p. 38) argued that multiple and evolving forms of self-identification have significant behavioral consequences, a claim that he extended to the level of states. According to Lebow, these identities guide how actors perceive themselves in the world and respond to international dynamics. Such an understanding of the intricate connection of national identity to foreign policy highlights the fluidity, multiplicity, and processuality of both. These insights are especially helpful in the case of reinterpreting Ukraine's foreign policy before 2014. As was shown in the literature review, the pre-2014 Ukraine foreign policy was often labeled as balancing, bandwagoning, or multivector. Yet, this research also implied that Ukraine's foreign policy—whether in rhetoric, actions, or both—was almost always too pro-Russian and never pro-European enough. Lebow's conviction that states can have multiple and evolving identifications provides more space and grace for pre-2014 Ukrainian foreign policy to be seen as a process of diversification of Ukraine's foreign policies, which included both its efforts to get closer to the EU and keep pragmatic relations with its other neighbor.

Further, White and Feklyunina (2014, p. 23) proposed that analyzing competing identity discourses by political elites offers insight into the *evolution* of dominant identities and their influence on foreign policy, from integration to confrontation. Feklyunina (2015, p. 779) also argued that a nation's identity narrative dynamic reflects the interests that shape the state's foreign policy. Likewise, Hopf (2016, p. 11) suggested that a dominant discourse of national identity tends to persist over time and can help explain a wide range of foreign

policy outcomes regardless of who is responsible for foreign policy. These insights into the nexus of national identity and foreign policy further support the idea that both national identity and foreign policy are fluid and process-like and explicitly argue that national identity narratives have direct reflections on a state's foreign policy outcomes. Hopf additionally contributed to this perspective by suggesting that the *steadily growing* and enduring power of the *predominant narrative* overrides a specific decision-maker and can help trace the roots of a foreign policy's continuity. In the case of Ukraine, this is helpful because, as with Yanukovych trying to U-turn on the EU Association Agreement in late 2013, the declared and agreed upon metanarrative of no return to Russia persisted, and the pro-European one became even more prominent. This suggested that Euromaidan was not the start but the visible manifestation of the dominant narratives and what Guibernau (2007) called "latent closeness" appearing in the face of existential threat.

Hopf's main claim from an earlier work (2012) supported the argument that national identity informs foreign policy through the example of the Soviet Union, where domestic understandings of what it meant to be Soviet directly influenced how the USSR related to socialist and capitalist states. While acknowledging the role and importance of the Soviet political elites since they did matter as the final authority, he emphasized the public's understanding of what it meant to be Soviet, to be socialist. Here, Hopf said two important things. First, the key assumption and argument of Hopfian Constructivism is that how the state understands itself at home informs how it acts abroad. Second, despite the USSR's political system and structure, Hopf attributed great importance to the public's understanding of their national identity. The latter is especially crucial in the case of pre-2104 Ukraine because, as I will argue, it was not what the elite did but rather what they promised to do and then did not deliver, which mattered more in the interplay of popular and elite narratives. Ukrainian public's understanding of their national identity by 2014 was developed enough to

respond to the diverging foreign policy of the end of Yanukovych's presidency, thus highlighting the potential of a shared popular identity.

Together, these perspectives provide a robust conceptualization for a theoretically coherent argument that Ukraine's evolving national identity narratives influenced its foreign policy trajectory and developments. This leads to the next section where I further unpack constructivist understandings of IR, national identity and its relation to foreign policy.

Theory

As a highly debated concept, national identity has been studied through various lenses. Some International Relations approaches, such as neoclassical realism, recognized the importance of elite perceptions and interests to a certain degree (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015; Smith, 2016), but did not engage with identity narratives. Given the constructivist and discursive conceptualization of national identity that I adopt in this project, it is most appropriately studied through a constructivist lens. In this section of the chapter, I make a case for this and present my arguments for choosing Constructivism as the theoretical framework for this research, opening the way for later sections to further unpack constructivist approaches to studying national identity and foreign policy as the theoretical and conceptual foundations for this thesis.

In what follows, I first provide an overview of Constructivism as a theoretical paradigm and then specify a variation advanced by Ted Hopf. It is important to note that, in this research, I seek to apply Hopf's understanding of Societal Constructivism and its interpretive framework to understand the relationship between domestic identity and foreign policy in the case of pre-2014 Ukraine rather than advance or contribute to Constructivism as a theoretical approach within International Relations more broadly.

Constructivism

As has been made clear in previous chapters, in this thesis, I aim to answer how Ukraine's national identity narratives—both public and elite—evolved between 2004 and 2014 in response to political crises and foreign policy shifts, what unifying narratives shaped its foreign policy goals, and how the alignment or tension between elite and public narratives influenced Ukraine's foreign policy. Considering that the research questions are identity and narrative-heavy, it makes sense to utilize an approach that values and prioritizes national identity and discourses, emphasizing the importance of the interplay between elite and popular narratives.

While some neoclassical realist studies pay attention to ideational factors, neoclassical realism does not provide the most fitting framework for this research, as its primary focus is on the policymakers, their perceptions, and identities, but not on the public narratives, discourses' interplay, and national identity's informing role for foreign policy. Due to the two major revolutions of 2004 and 2014 that drastically influenced, formed, and informed government offices and policymakers, it is crucial to pay more attention to public discourses and identities. Similarly, civilizational understanding may not fully address the issue at hand, namely Ukraine's national identity, and will have to incorporate the EU and Russia's civilizational views—something this thesis does not intend to undertake as its focus.

As this study's research question focuses on Ukraine's identity, popular and elite narratives' interplay, and its influence on Ukraine's foreign policy, Constructivism is an appropriate option as a theoretical approach for this research. Established systemic theories such as Realism and Liberalism did not predict the end of the Cold War[24]. This created a

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[24] As Hopf puts it, "Systemic IR theories […] are not aimed, or able, to do more than explain why there was the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States after World War II. Moreover, historians, for the most part, concentrate on providing compelling accounts of particular events and relationships during the Cold War." (See Reconstructing the Cold War: The early years, 1945 - 1958 / Ted Hopf. New York: New York: Oxford University Press)

vacuum in IR, which led to the "third debate" (Lapid, 1989) and provided a platform for

Constructivism to rise and engage in the debates alongside dominant IR theories such as

(neo)realism and (neo)liberalism, and eventually surpass them (Checkel, 1998; Hopf, 1998).

Constructivism presented world politics as being not fixed, unlike the natural world, and

dependent upon human action and cognition, accenting the role of such factors as language,

communication, identity, and perceptions. While lacking a central government, the

international system is still a system with intersubjective rules made and reproduced by

human practices (Guzzini, 2000, p. 155).

Constructivism is a distinctive yet broad approach that emphasizes the social,

ideational, and intersubjective matters of international relations, with its main assumption that

the international system is socially constructed (Chernoff, 2008, p. 68). Jeffery Checkel

characterized Constructivism as an approach that inquires about the fundamental conceptions

of how the social and political world works based on two suppositions: "1) the environment

in which agents/states take action is social as well as material, and 2) this setting can provide

agents/states with understandings of their interests (it can "constitute" them)" (Checkel, 1998,

pp. 325-326). Some strands of Constructivism challenged the traditional positivist

understanding that phenomena can constitute themselves as objects of knowledge

independently of discursive practices. They also challenged language-independent

observations' claims that our interpretations are based on a shared system of codes and

symbols of language and social practices. They concluded that the knowledge of reality and

the concept of power are intersubjective and socially constructed (Guzzini, 2000, pp. 159-

160, 174). Constructivism assumes that "identities are part of the constitutive practices of the

state," and so, identities are produced both domestically and internationally through politics,

foreign policy, and other social contexts such as media, social trends, demographics, etc.

(Hopf, 1998, p. 193). Theses insights are useful for this research as they justify centering

Ukraine as the producer of its identity and policy as well as emphasize discursive practices in creating the intersubjective world for Ukrainians.

The term "constructivism" was first introduced to the studies of IR by Nicholas Onuf in 1989, arguing that the states behave and interact similarly to human beings by adhering to the constructed rules in the "world of our making." In his seminal work, he contended that speaking equals doing, rules are essential to social life, and it is rule, not anarchy, that makes an ongoing condition of international politics, and thus, introduced the notions of socialization into the theory of IR. Checkel (1998) further identified key constructivist concepts such as "identity," "discourse," and "norms" that are crucial in research dedicated to security and foreign policy. Alexander Wendt (1999) focused more on the structure of international relations and different cultures of world politics, arguing that different "role structures" (Hobbesian, Lockean, or Kantian) produce different state identities and different patterns of international relations (Wendt, 1999, p. 267). At his systemic approach, Wendt's primary concern was the social milieu the state operates in – that is, is it Hobbesian, Lockean, or Kantian, and not a state's domestic (corporate) element. Although some constructivists adopt a systemic approach, others offer perspectives that more closely align with the focus of this research. As I examine how Ukraine's national identity developed prior to Russia's aggression beginning in 2014, and what implications this had for its foreign policy during that period, an approach that emphasizes the internal discursive construction of identity—despite, and at times in spite of, external influences from the broader international system—is more appropriate. This approach will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

According to another significant contributor to IR's discourse on Constructivism, Hopf, Constructivism provides alternative insights into a variety of the major themes in IR theory, in particular, "the meaning of anarchy and balance of power, the relationship between state identity and interest, an elaboration of power, and the prospects for change in world

politics" (Hopf, 1998, p. 172). Karin Fierke (2013, pp. 188-189) highlighted three main contributions of Constructivism to the idea that "international relations is a social construction." First, the idea of social construction suggests differences across contexts rather than a single objective reality, as it used to be theorized before. Second, Constructivism emphasizes the social dimensions of international relations and validates the significance of rules, norms, and language. Finally, Constructivism suggests that, far from objective reality, international politics as 'a world of our making' introduces the prospects of agency and accentuates processes of interaction. Based on these assumptions, in this thesis I treat Ukraine's foreign policy not as a function of objective interests, but as the outcome of interplay of identity narratives embedded in social discourse. These narratives, articulated through novels, media, and elite memoirs, help constitute the ideational landscape in which foreign policy choices are made.

According to this social understanding of international relations, states, and other agents do not simply respond and behave in a rational, cost-benefit manner but are engaging meaningfully with one another. The core concepts and ideas, such as the importance of social understanding, language, state agency, identity, and discourses developed within Constructivism and its contributory insights into the major themes of world politics, are fundamental to this study as I investigate identity narratives and their role in shaping Ukraine's foreign policy. The research questions focus on national identity—a concept that is inherently immaterial and intangible—making the investigation particularly complex. Given this, Constructivism, with its emphasis on the social construction of meaning in international relations as well as the commitment to discourse/narrative, provides the most suitable overarching theoretical framework for this dissertation.

In this thesis, I adopt a broadly constructivist approach, focusing on the intersubjective construction of meaning and its influence on international politics.

Hopfian Societal Constructivism

According to what Hopf termed a cognitive explanation of Societal Constructivism, identity performs three functions in society: it tells you and others who you are, and it tells you who others are. He further developed that "in telling you who you are, identity strongly implies a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices or action in particular domains, and in respect to particular actors" (Hopf, 1998, p. 175). Similarly, the identity of a state implies its preferences and subsequent actions. Hopf exemplified this by referring to the arguments found in *The Culture of National Security* edited by Peter Katzenstein (1996). For example, Dana Eyre and Mark Suchman found that controlling for rational strategic need, domestic coalition politics, and superpower manipulation, countries in the third world prefer certain weapons systems over others because of their understanding of what it means to be "modern" in the twentieth century (Eyre and Suchman, 1996, pp. 77-113).

When it comes to theoretical conceptualizations, Hopf argued that the identity of a state is a variable that depends on historical, cultural, political, and social context. By contending that interests are the product of identity, he further explained that having a specific identity infers a particular set of interests different from those inferred by a different identity. The social practices that constitute an identity cannot infer interests inconsistent with the practices and structure that constitute that particular identity (Hopf, 1998, p.176). Wendt (1999, p. 274) similarly argued that interests constitute identities as an agent cannot identify its desired preferences unless it understands who it is. This means that identities define what is meaningful or appropriate to want. States cannot pursue just any interest—they can only pursue those that make sense given who they are. Hopf believed that constructivism credits states as having more agency than other IR theories and approaches that emphasize material factors and rational cost-benefit calculations. However, since the maker of the identity is not

in control of what it means to others and the intersubjective structure becomes the ultimate arbiter of meaning, there are webs of understandings about the practices, identities, and interests of other actors that constrain the state's agency (Hopf, 1998, pp. 174-177). For Hopf, a state's identity as a social function is constituted by social practices and structure and, in turn, constitutes the state's interests, which implies particular preferences and choices in certain spheres of the state life.

According to Hopf's (2012, pp. 5-16) analysis of the Soviet Union's identity and its relations with various states, Societal Constructivism argues that how a state understands itself at home explains how it relates to other states abroad. By "societal constructivism," Hopf meant an approach that argued that "how the Soviet Union understood itself at home explains how it related to other states abroad." While acknowledging the role and importance of the Soviet political elites since they did matter as the final authority, he emphasized mass public understanding of what it meant to be Soviet and to be socialist, which animates societal Constructivism.

While in this research I utilize Constructivism as the main theoretical approach, Ted Hopf's perspective on how identity influences foreign policy will inspire my approach to analyze the identity formation and evolution during the process of Ukraine's nation-building before 2014. Hopf's insights are useful for this research because I focus on the identity narratives and foreign policy developments before Ukraine met existential threat from Russia in 2014, thus centering Ukraine's domestic dynamics as the source for its national identity and foreign policy.

Constructivism is built on the assumption that political and social reality is intersubjective and represented in the form of discourses (practices, texts, or actions). Hopf (2012) further argued that Societal Constructivism can be understood as an institutionalist theory of international politics. Its core assumption is that the intersubjective world—shared

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meanings and understandings—matters more than purely objective or subjective realities. As a result, collective structures of meaning, or institutions, become central to analysis. These institutions are often conceptualized as discourses of identity, with Hopf asserting that discourses themselves function as institutions (Hopf, 2012, p. 23).

While Societal Constructivism shares the liberal "bottom-up" approach, it privileges the social identity structures in which elites have been brought up and educated over electoral and interest group politics. Hopf concluded that Societal Constructivism theorizes that the identities that are being created in society as a whole inform the elite understanding of national identity. As he argued, discourses (texts and social practices) are empowered by institutions (Hopf, 2012, pp. 8, 30). It raises the question of how or why some discourses of national identity are enabled while others are not. Hopf (2012, pp. 8-43) also differentiated between the predominant official discourse that may be imposed, reinforced, infused, competed against, and circumvented and its alternative challengers.

Ultimately, Hopfian Societal Constructivism relies on two main conventions even when Hopf turned to quantitative methods[25] for investigating national identities: intersubjectivity of social reality and trying to be data-driven rather than theory-assuming while conducting research. Hopf argued that intersubjectivity is violated when national identity is reduced to a single measure, such as language, religion, or ethnicity (Hopf, 2016, p. 1). This echoes Feklyunina's proposition to engage a framework for identity narratives, "which is not limited to an individual state or a nation, but uses other—not necessarily ethnic or national—markers to construct a shared understanding of common interests" (Feklyunina, 2015, p. 777). Such attention to intersubjectivity and openness to non-essentialist markers of national identity are important for this research, as I set to challenge many findings from

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[25] Hopf, Ted, and Bentley B. Allan, eds. Making identity count: Building a national identity database. Oxford University Press, 2016.

previous research based on subjective surveys or static observations. Instead, I aimed to reconstruct and present an intersubjective reality of pre-2014 Ukraine, which suggested that most of the previously framed divisive issues as less meaningful than often assumed. Hopf's dedication to deep induction and an attempt to approach the identities "as atheoretically as possible" (Hopf, 2002, p. 23) is equally important as my aim here was to model what Hopf did in his study of Soviet identities and reconstruct pre-2014 Ukraine's identities by investigating Ukraine's intersubjective "everyday" of that time, rather than letting theory read any assumptions into the data.

As in this project, I center Ukraine's national identity in my reinterpretation of its foreign policy before 2014, in the following section I present the interpretivist methodology as well as methods and data I used in this research.

Methodology

Within interpretivist research, the understanding of reality is intricately linked to the way inquiry is conducted, making ontological clarity foundational to methodological coherence. Hall (2003, p. 374) argued for aligning ontology and methodology. In his words, "ontology is ultimately crucial to methodology because the appropriateness of a particular set of methods for a given problem turns on the assumptions about the nature of the causal relations they are meant to discover". Ontological assumptions in the social sciences present a spectrum of various beliefs about reality, ranging from realism to relativism to nominalism (Jackson et al., 2015, p. 49). In this thesis, I adopt a relativist ontology.

A relativist ontology assumes that social phenomena are defined and experienced differently by different people, depending on their background and the contexts or countries in which they live (Jackson et al., 2015, pp. 49-50). Such an anti-foundationalist position asserts that "the social milieu is entirely socially constructed" (Moore, 2008, p. 10). In other

words, people's identity and contexts construct their reality. This assumption guided formulating the research questions for this thesis. Therefore, as no single objective reality can be discovered, different people may hold many perspectives on the same issue, depending on their identities. Additionally, the relativist position accepts that different observers may have different viewpoints and, as Collins (1983, p. 88) put it, "what counts for the truth can vary from place to place and from time to time".

Such ontological positioning allows for a flexible/fluid reality given the research questions, the complex and presumably divided identity of Ukraine, and the contested narratives in various demographics of Ukraine. This ontological position fits well within the broad theoretical framework chosen for this research project—Constructivism. Constructivism does not deny the existence of a material reality but affirms that its existence depends on our ideas and theories, stating that reality is a social construct (Dunne, 1995, p. 371). At the same time, Societal Constructivism takes this argument further and claims that "multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others" (Creswell, 2016, p. 75), thus making reality intersubjective (Wendt, 1994, p. 384), that is, "the reality that you and I, and perhaps millions more, agree on as existing" (Hopf, 2012, p. 7).[26] Such reality is not discovered; rather, it is actively constructed or reconstructed (Marsh and Stoker, 2010; Hopf, 2002; Hopf, 2012).

Methodological assumptions stem from both ontology and epistemology behind this thesis (Chalmers, 2013, p. 132). Andrew Hurrell has effectively argued the 'subjectivist' case against the rationalism of neoliberals, explicitly linking ontology to methodology:

> International regimes are necessarily intersubjective phenomena whose existence and validity are created and sustained in the interrelationship of their subjects [...] It suggests the need for a hermeneutic or interpretive methodology that seeks to recreate

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[26] This does not mean that I deny the existence of the material realm and its role in world affairs. I simply assert that such ontologically foundationalist 'reality' has no social role or causal power *independent* of the agent's understanding of it. See "A Skin, not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science," in David Marsh and Jerry Stoker, eds., Theory and Methods in Political Science, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

the historical and social processes by which rules and norms are constituted and a sense of obligation engendered (Hurrell, 1993, p. 64).

Thus, this research needs an interpretivist methodology that allows for rigorous and pragmatic inquiry into the intersubjective phenomena of Ukraine's national identity that is sustained in the interrelationship of its subjects, that is citizens.

Schutz (1970) suggested that research subjects confront a pre-interpreted world, a world ordered according to the meanings that constitute it. These meanings are expressed by subjects as typifications, making up a stock of knowledge. They are also organized according to a structure of relevance associated with the interests of the subject or the purpose at hand. The intersubjectivity of the world entails that other subjects are also oriented to similar typifications and expectations about behaviors. In order to achieve this, Schutz suggested a phenomenological analysis of commonsense thinking (or everyday rationality), which goes along well with Ted Hopf's version of Societal Constructivism and his phenomenological and inductive inquiry into the Soviet identity, which concentrated on the everyday life and common habits reflective of the national identity of the Soviets and informed Soviet foreign policy. For Hopf, phenomenology means letting the subjects speak through their texts, and induction implies reconstructing the subjects' identities as atheoretically as possible (Hopf, 2002, p. 23).

Reality is socially constructed, but while it is researchers who reconstruct that world and reflect on it, their views are shaped by social, political, and cultural processes (Marsh and Stoker, 2010, p. 190) as well as by research design, data selected, analysis, and writing (Yanow, 2003). Thus, the methodology employed in this research assumes a certain degree of bias, limitations, and researcher's positionality. These will be addressed at the end of this chapter.

According to Hopf (2012, p.7), constructivist research should focus on the intersubjective realities that dominate in a society. These intersubjective realities often come

in the form of discourses or a collection of practices and texts, written, spoken, or just done or performed, that define an actor's position or role within some intersubjective community. Understanding what makes up a discourse determines the main data types and primary sources, which I discuss later in this section.

Data used for this research

In this thesis, I analyzed and reconstructed popular and elite narratives about pre-2014 Ukrainian national identity and foreign policy. Inspired by Hopf's studies of the Soviet and Russian national identities (Hopf, 2002; Hopf, 2012), I used similar types of data, namely widely read journals, newspapers, popular novels and nonfiction literature, and elites' memoirs. I also included popular movies and TV shows.

Hopf's use of what is commonly referred to as popular or even classical literature as primary sources for reconstructing identity narratives is a well-established practice among critical and constructivist scholars who examine how discourses shape, are shaped by, and reflect national identities. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is a seminal text in postcolonial studies, and in it, he drew on a wide range of sources across disciplines. Said examined how literary works shaped and reflected the Western imagination of the "Orient," including writings of 18th- and 19th-century European scholars who specialized in the "Orient," travel writing and memoirs, as well as documents, speeches, and policies from European colonial powers. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said expanded on the ideas he introduced in *Orientalism* and analyzed how Western culture—especially literature— reflected, supported, and helped sustain imperial power by embracing imperialistic identities. His argument was that literature had been instrumental in shaping perceptions of the world and constructing identities by normalizing imperialist ideologies within everyday narratives.

These insidious narratives create our understanding of the world and our identity more so than political speeches, something that is deliberately overlooked.

Other more recent works by Whitmarsh (2011), Lebow (2012), and Edensor (2020) used ancient and modern literature to recover "everyday life" narratives about people's self-conceptions. As Lebow (2012) argued, many cultural texts have reached far broader audiences than traditional political or philosophical writings. He suggested that, aside from the Old Testament, the *Iliad* may have been the most influential text in Western culture. These works, according to Lebow, have played a significant role in shaping both popular and elite conceptions of the self (Lebow, 2012, p. 53). Lebow's argument that literature shapes and reflects both popular and elite perceptions of their identities is crucial for two reasons. First, it supports the practicability of using popular texts to reconstruct national identity narratives. Second, it argues against the dichotomy of popular versus elite narratives. While there are definite differences in how popular and elite narratives are constructed, distributed, and controlled, the intersubjectivity that Societal Constructivism is based on appeals to a more wholistic dynamic of the interaction of all narratives available for interplay because the elite are also members of the general public to a certain degree or they want to be seen as such at least in their narratives. In this thesis, I aimed to focus on the interplay of popular and elite narratives and how elite narratives responded to and engaged with popular narratives rather than looking into the stand-off between the two.

Movies are also a good primary source for recovering narratives about national identity. Martin-Jones (2006), Lebow (2012), and Hopf (2016) argued that movies can be mediums for expressing life experiences and shaping identities, as characters often become figures with whom people identify or even emulate (Lebow, 2012, p. 49) and used movies as their primary data. Hall (2000) and Ashuri (2005) argued for the unique advantages of audiovisual sources while recovering narratives in relation to national identity.

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I reconstructed popular and elite narratives on Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy using 10 novels, selected articles from 746 newspapers issues, 15 movies, 15 elite memoirs, and speech collections as my primary sources. In each chapter, I provided a brief overview of the novels and movies and some details about the articles and memoirs. Here, I will explain how I chose the novels, articles, and movies.

Starting with the novels and movies, I focused on those produced during or very close to the timeframe of my research—1994-2014. While Taras Shevchenko and Lesya Ukrainka are undeniably foundational figures in Ukrainian cultural identity—having profoundly shaped Ukrainian literature and culture—I chose to focus on modern works about modern times. Specifically, those created, read, and widely appreciated after Ukraine regained independence, during a time when Ukrainians were free to actively explore and define who they were and where they envisioned themselves as a nation in the future. These specific novels that I chose might not become Ukrainian classics, but they do constitute the raw intellectual product of some highly respected writers of that time, and therefore, they make a great primary source in principle. I cross-ranked novels published between 1994 and 2014 which received various awards and public recognition.

Awards such as Laureates of the Taras Shevchenko National Prize of Ukraine, BBC Book of the Year, and Ukrainian Book of the Year—an annual award presented by the President of Ukraine—were decided by other writers, literature and culture experts and by a decree of the President on Ukraine. Additionally, I considered the results of an online survey by the Ukrainian Book Institute in 2021, in which 267,815 Ukrainians voted for the 30 most iconic books of the Independence era. After having made a cross-ranked list based on the awards mentioned above; and due to the war in Ukraine, I had to limit my data pool to the resources available—four novels for the 1994-2004 decade and six for 2004-2014. Writers like Lina Kostenko, Oksana Zabuzko, Yurii Andryukhovych, and Serhii Zhadan have their

works on the recommended lists by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine for secondary and higher education students.

Elites' memoirs are widely used by researchers who investigate official discourses. White and Feklyunina (2014, p. 144) referred to "a book that was published under [Kuchma's] name" to interpret Kuchma's views on Ukraine-Russia relations. Hopf used memoirs in his books to reconstruct official Soviet and Russian discourses. In this thesis, I did not aim to argue about the appropriateness of using elite memoirs in political research or defend their credibility or even authorship. Viktor Yanukovych was not the brightest President of Ukraine and very much a non-intellectual, yet I used 5 books with his name on them, both memoirs and a collection of his speeches (which were unlikely written by him either) because Ukrainians either voted for or against him, and not the speech- or shadow-writers. In my view, it is not important who actually wrote the memoir as long as there is an elite name attached to it that serves as a trademark of approval for that written piece.

When it came to newspaper articles, I read two issues for each month of each year from late 1990s to 2014 without targeting specific events or topics—so the material reflects what was generally published, not what I specifically wanted to find. The rationale for random sampling strategy was to recreate a pattern of the everyday readership of what was available but without a specific purpose of looking for keywords or significant dates on purpose to ensure representativeness and minimize selection bias. The idea was to read whatever people would read for fun and to be updated on the events in Ukraine and around the globe as they developed, and not a National Geographic type or any other "topical" or "professional" journals. I discuss newspapers in more detail in my empirical chapters, some of which did not have earlier archives. Thus, I did not get to read everything published, but what I did get to read contributed to my understanding of what an average Ukrainian would read back in the day. Therefore, while my data may constitute an incomplete sample, they are

still broadly representative for the purposes of this research. I also tried to balance the language of publications by choosing one Ukrainian and one Russian language for newspapers to ensure accessibility, availability, and high readership.

As for the movies and TV shows, I watched what was made and shown in Ukraine during the timeframe of my research. Just like the novels, the movies I picked were appraised by established Ukrainian cinematography entities such as the Dovzhenko Center or what was shown in primetime on Ukrainian TV. In my view, engaging with audiovisual material, in addition to the written one, was extremely helpful in emerging into the intersubjective world of pre-2014 Ukrainian society as it provided valuable insights into the interpersonal dynamics between Ukrainian people and people and the elite, and people and the Other.

Collectively, novels, newspapers, memoirs, and movies as my primary sources contributed to a nuanced and deeper understanding of what it meant to be Ukrainian during the decade under investigation and where Ukrainians would have preferred Ukraine to be in the future. Combining written and audiovisual material added an extra degree of immersion into the reconstructed intersubjective world of pre-2014 Ukraine, while the language diversity of the sources helped with the scope and coverage of the everyday. In the next section, I discuss how I analyzed data from the primary sources discussed above.

Methods used in this research

To answer the thesis' research questions, I had to undertake three empirical tasks while I engaged with the data. The first empirical task was to find out how Ukrainians understood themselves from 2004 to 2014. How did they think of themselves as Ukrainians? What was their intersubjective world? What was Ukrainian? What was Ukraine? The second task was to find out and engage with the Ukrainian elites' narratives on identity and foreign policy in that period. The last task was to evaluate to what degree society's intersubjective

world was mirrored in the elite's narratives, that is to evaluate the interplay (alignment and tensions) between popular and elite narratives. This interplay represents the "causes" that Societal Constructivism assumes would influence Ukraine's foreign policy. Ukraine's domestic political landscape and foreign policy decision-making between 2004 and 2014 were reinterpreted to demonstrate this.

As the research questions for this thesis suggest, my main aim was to recover popular and elite narratives about Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy before 2014. Considering the relativist ontology and interpretivist methodology that guide this research, the empirical tasks of this project, and the types of my primary sources, I used two main methods—Narrative Analysis and Ethnographic Content Analysis.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis involves reconstructing how people create and use stories to make sense of their reality. Narrative analysis is based on collecting people's lived experiences as they are narrated, and then analyzing them through an interpretivist methodology. Such discourses are usually not viewed as sets of facts but as "devices through which people represent themselves [and their worlds] to themselves and to others" (Lawler, 2002, p. 242). Earlier in this chapter, I presented various conceptualizations of national identity and how identity is viewed in this project. It is also important to discuss how in this thesis I understand what narrative is and what it does, as this will guide my narrative analysis for both popular and elite identity narratives.

Lebow argued that "life narratives are piecemeal and inchoate. They take the form of internal dialogues and real or fictional conversations with others" (Lebow, 2012, p. 49) that "tell people who they are, what they should aspire to be and how they should relate to others" (Lebow, 2012, p. 46). Carol Feldman (2001) proposed that national narrative is "*not* just a

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report of what people *do*, but also of how they do it, and with what relationships among them" (Feldman, 2001, p. 131) but should be seen as "a special case of the group-defining story" (Feldman, 2001, p. 143). Martin-Jones (2006, p. 1) argued that narratives "demonstrate a nation's exploration of its own 'national narrative', its examination of the national past, present and/or future in search of causes, and possible alternatives, to its current state of existence". Based on these perspectives, national narratives are dynamic, constructed stories that shape collective identity and meaning through selective events, relationships, interactions, and articulated preferred futures. They are not fixed or purely factual accounts but interpretive frameworks through which individuals and groups make sense of themselves and their place in the world.

Many scholars distinguish between so-called big and small narratives. Hønneland (2010) differentiated ontological (individual) and master (meta)narratives. Lebow (2012) looked into macro and analytical levels, and Yanow (2014) distinguished between low and high data. Yehudith Auerbach further (2010) distinguished between national narratives and meta-narratives, emphasizing their interdependent roles in shaping collective identity. She defined national narratives as "concrete stories about dramatic events in the recent history or distant past of a nation" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 101). In contrast, a meta-narrative is "a super-story... the holistic, hierarchical framework that embraces the national narratives and creates and feeds them, while the national narratives revive, reinforce, and feed the meta-narrative" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 102).

Similarly, Kaplan et al. (2022) argued that while national identities are expressed through distinct narratives, they are constructed within a broader framework of metanarratives. These metanarratives serve as overarching structures that shape collective social identities and guide the design of specific narratives. By situating individual narratives within a wider context, metanarratives help communities define desirable social norms and

foster a sense of uniqueness and unity (Kaplan et al., 2022, pp. 1153-1154). This dynamic illustrates how national narratives and meta-narratives function in a reciprocal relationship, continually constructing and reinforcing broader self-identification frameworks. Additionally, as Kaplan et al. pointed out, "the metanarrative [does not] necessarily represent each citizen's sense of national identity" (Kaplan et al., 2022, p. 1166).

For the purposes of this thesis, I focused on these so-called big meta-narratives that encompass and overcome many various potentially conflicting narratives without suggesting rigid homogeneity across different local and regional smaller narratives in pre-2014 Ukraine. As I see it, national narratives are stories about the past, present, and future, which do not have to be real or true. They are just stories that intend to shape a certain reality or provide reflections and projections of a certain reality that the narrator perceives as real. Narratives are not only about the past and present but also are future- and action-oriented, which indicates intentionality and potential to inform policy. Meta-narrative can provide a shared platform that engages and involves people with different self-identifications by bringing people closer despite their possible apparent differences.

In all novels and screen media as my primary data I used, I looked for big themes, motifs, conversations, and ideas that stood out as overarching, prominent, and undercurrent. While reading to reconstruct elite narratives, I focused on themes related to national identity and foreign policy, as well as any elements that intersected with or responded to the popular narratives. These themes (or metanarratives) were not the only themes in each novel or movie. Each data source had its own smaller narratives and themes; these, however, were the most prominent reoccurring themes (metanarratives) that came up during the cross-reading of the novels and interacting with other data. These metanarratives varied in tones and emphasis, but the core messages were similar. Analyzing how closely these metanarratives align with smaller narratives of individuals' views on national identity requires empirically

different data that falls outside the scope and purpose of my thesis. Therefore, i) I do not suggest that the metanarratives identified by me in this project are subjectively true or relevant to every Ukrainian citizen; ii) there are other important popular and elite narratives found in the data that are outside the scope of this project; and iii) throughout this thesis, I use "metanarratives" and "narratives" interchangeably, and mean big metanarratives unless I clarify otherwise.

Hopf's (2002) steps for his reconstruction of Soviet identities were contextualization, intertextualization, identity aggregation, and discursive formations and contestations. Yanow (2000) proposed a more flexible framework for narrative analysis that starts with accessing local knowledge, and interpreting meanings. I modeled after Hopf and Yanow's steps in this research, primarily focusing on intertextualization, narrative aggregation, and interpreting meanings. In contrast to Hopf, I was not looking for specific nominal identity types but rather for overarching themes related to the questions on how Ukrainians perceived, framed, and thought about their national identity and desirable future. In contrast to Yanow, I did not focus on specific words or symbols as much because my thesis's purpose and research questions do not take a critical analysis approach. Instead, I mainly focused on big themes and ideas, both explicit and implied.

Re-constructing Ukraine's popular identity involved reading popular novels and nonfiction literature and watching movies. In order to reconstruct the official predominant Ukrainian discourse of identity in that period, elite memoirs and speeches were read after Ukraine's popular identity was comprehensively aggregated and discursively formed. Then, I looked into how popular and elite narratives interplayed with each other and provided my reinterpretation of Ukraine's foreign policy before 2014 in light of the narratives' interplay.

Narrative Analysis of Popular Identity Narratives

To reconstruct popular identity narratives, I analyzed novels in three ways—literarily, narratively, and intertextually.

Close literary cross-readings gave me general insights and impressions from the texts as an ordinary Ukrainian reader. Having a degree with a minor in Literature Studies was helpful in this process, as I was able to identify and appreciate the genres, styles, rhetorical devices, imageries, and tones to uncover deeper meanings and tensions in the texts. I discuss these literary devices, their changes between the decades, and their importance in detail in Chapters 4 and 5. While reading, I took quotations from the novels to compile a codebook in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Separately, I kept notes of the literary analysis for each novel to ensure I could refer to it if and when needed.

After reading all the novels for each decade narratively, I reread all the quotes and made sidenotes while reflecting on the quotes. Then, as certain common themes started to arise, I assigned codes to those themes. The next step was to identify any overlapping or related sub-themes or variations of a bigger theme that I would later use to detail my reconstruction of that particular narrative or to group smaller themes into a bigger one. Some quotes would qualify for more than just one theme, so I would assign additional themes to them in the spreadsheet.

Finally, cross-reading novels intertextually ensured the cohesiveness of my reconstructing narratives from the texts. Intertextuality, as a concept coined and popularized by Julia Kristeva (1986), assumes that no text stands alone; that is, every text is shaped by and shapes a web of other texts. While reading the novels, I noticed allusions and direct references to other texts and relations between the genres, spotted thematic echoes and traced dialogues with other novels and newspaper articles as even more popular cultural texts. Additionally, I sorted my codebook by the codes I gave to the identified narratives from

different novels and reread them in one flow, which gave me a more nuanced, deeper, and wider picture of how each theme was narrated in different novels.

This three-layered approach to narrative analysis of the novels enabled me to reconstruct popular narratives around Ukrainian national identity and complete my first empirical task of finding out how Ukrainians understood themselves from 2004 to 2014.

Narrative Analysis for Elite Identity Narratives

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, my intention was not to debate whether elite memoirs are suitable sources for political research nor to defend their reliability or the authenticity of their authorship; that is, I did not evaluate whether what was said was "true" or whether they believed it was "true". I analyzed the elite-related texts as if they were true and how that "truth" was related and narrated to the public and voters. I did not evaluate nor defend the degree to which any given President believed in what he said. I simply evaluated and interpreted their narratives and not their true beliefs. Yanukovych, who presented himself as a patriot of Ukraine willing to sacrifice his life for it, in 2014 disgracefully betrayed those who believed him and the whole of Ukraine. What someone says is not always what they believe and often not what they do. Especially in politics, things should not be taken at face value, but for the purposes of this research, I had to take them at face value as the elites presented them to the voters. Ukrainians responded to the narratives they thought the elite believed and to the ideas they declared as real. The elites' declared narratives about Ukrainian national identity and foreign policy, their framings for both, and their engagement with the popular narratives are what matters in this thesis.

As it is impossible and also not important in this thesis to tell to what extent the presidents were involved in the writing process of their memoirs, I read their personal background into the text to a minor degree but instead focused on how the elites envisioned the past, present, and future regarding Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy, and

most importantly, how they related their narratives to those of general public. In Chapters 4, 6, and 7, I discuss how some narratives resonated with, responded to, completed, ignored, or undermined popular narratives.

While analyzing the elites' memoirs and speech collections, I paid attention to how they narrated temporality (where they saw Ukraine was and when the speech was delivered and the memoir published), binaries and pluralities (both domestic and international), causality (how the past, present, and future relate), and positionality (in office or opposition).

As the task at this stage was to identify and analyze Ukrainian elites' narratives on identity and foreign policy, I made a codebook of related quotes based on the qualifiers mentioned in the paragraph above. Then, I assigned names to each quote to group and systemize my material. Like popular narratives, most of the quotes from the elite data would qualify for more than one theme. In this case, I would assign main and additional codes for each quote in separate columns. Sorting by the main narrative codes provided insights into how each president saw a particular theme wholistically, how it developed over time, and how it related to other narratives, thus highlighting the complexity and interdependency of Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies. Also, I kept notes on continuity, discontinuity, and shifts in individual presidents' narratives and among all three presidents as the collective elite of Ukraine to use later when I synthesized elites' narratives in Chapters 4 and 6.

Prioritizing popular narratives and reflecting on how the elite narratives related to those of the public achieved intertextuality to both the Chapters on the elite narratives and the thesis as a whole. Additionally, I paid attention to what texts, ideas, and narratives the elites appealed to in their writing outside of the primary sources for this thesis. This contributed to both intertextuality and contextuality that helped recreate and reinterpret Ukraine's domestic political landscape and foreign policy before 2014.

Ethnographic Content Analysis

My final empirical task was to assess how closely the elite's narratives reflect the intersubjective world of society—that is, to examine the interplay between popular and elite narratives, including both their alignments and points of tension. To reach the intersubjective reality of Ukrainians of that time, I focused on the material that did not explicitly appeal to Ukrainian identity, as Hopf argued that "it should just come up incidentally, in asides, as taken for granted knowledge" (Hopf, 2012, p. 26). Through non-purposive reading of newspapers and watching Ukraine-made movies and primetime TV shows, I attempted to engage with the intersubjectivity of Ukrainian society and recreate the everyday of that time.

Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) was an appropriate method for this task, considering the research question and the types of my primary data: newspapers and TV. ECA is a reflexive content analysis approach involving description, attention to nuances, and openness to emerging insights. ECA aims to discover and verify meanings, is reflexive, reflective, and immersive in nature, and emphasizes the validity of findings (Altheide and Schneider, 2012). Elizabeth Yardley (2024) proposed the following steps for ECA after data is selected—immersing in the context, developing initial categories, coding the data, analyzing the data, writing narrative descriptions, and reflexive analysis. Yanow (2000, p. 38) suggested paying attention to acts, interactions, verbal and nonverbal language, uses of objects, written language, description of objects, and historical records of events when doing an ethnographic analysis. Insights of both academics guided my approach to ECA while analyzing the written and audiovisual media.

As my intention was to recreate a "normal everyday," I randomly sampled two issues per month without purposefully thinking about election campaign cycles, state holidays, or any other qualifier. Inspired by Vickovic et al.'s (2013) study, I analyzed newspaper articles in three steps. First, I had to read each article and identify whether it was relevant to my

research question or not. If the article was deemed relevant, I saved it whole or in part. Then, I analyzed whether any relevant article talked about any given issue in positive, neutral, or negative tones. Finally, I coded emerging patterns relevant to the popular and elite narratives. This contributed to contextualization and detailization of Ukraine's domestic dynamic, reconstructed narratives, and reinterpretation of foreign policy.

Watching movies and TV shows as an ECA method provided me with further immersion and insights into the intersubjective world of pre-2014 Ukraine. Paying attention to the aspects suggested by Yanow helped me immerse myself in the context and content of the audiovisual material. Taking notes while watching was crucial for developing initial categories of themes that came up and coding the data. Drawing parallels between the data from the written and audiovisual material through reflexive analysis led me to draft narrative descriptions that I later incorporated into my Chapters.

A Note on My Positionality

This thesis relies on relativist ontology and interpretivist methodology and is written by a Donbas-born and raised Ukrainian while Russia bombs Ukraine daily. Theoretically or methodologically, this work cannot be further from a positivist account. It cannot be objective or non-biased either. While some more positivist and quantitative approaches would judge this as a lack of validity, overwhelming bias, and unacknowledged limitations, I address these issues from my reflexivity and positionality as a researcher.

Fook (1999), Mortari (2015), Soedirgo and Glas (2020) argued for the additional value of a researcher's reflexivity in narrative research. Mortari (2015) affirmed that in interpretivist analysis, reflexivity is crucial to legitimate and validate research procedures. In this thesis, I attempted to present my research findings and interrogate and clarify the processes through which those findings were produced. Soedirgo and Glas, 2020, pp. 527–

528) defined active reflexivity as a triple movement of ongoing self-interrogation—reflecting on one's own positionality, anticipating how others might read that positionality in each context, and questioning assumptions made in the first two reflections. I followed their strategies of being actively reflexive. I recorded my positionality assumptions and regularly reflected on my pre-and post-interaction with data thoughts. It was beneficial for me to see Kuchma and Yanukovych's narratives in a different way. I also often involved others in my reflection by engaging in conversations with my supervisors and other PhD students, presenting my research at BISA and BASEES conferences and discussing it with other researchers, as well as Ukrainian friends from different parts of the country, who are going through the ongoing reflexive process themselves as displaced refugees or volunteers in Ukraine. Additionally, I showed my reflexivity clearly by explicitly stating my views on not defending the elite narratives or claiming the homogeneity of the popular narratives.

Elizabeth Dauphinee (2015, p. 46), referring to Inayatullah (2010), affirmed that "we will all write from a wound that follows us". She further translated this argument into IR and suggests that it is exactly the researcher's positional reflexivity typically helps them to avoid making broad, sweeping generalizations drawn from their personal experiences and serves as "a permanent reminder of the smallness of one's capacities and ambitions—of the inherent limitations of any 'self' to erect an architecture of truth" (Dauphinee, 2015, p. 46). When I set out to write this thesis in 2019, I had to constantly defend my argument that the Russian aggression and Ukraine's pro-European choice are national identity issues. As someone whose hometown had been occupied since 2014, I had to intentionally hide that wound by presenting my argument as "logically" as possible. After 2022, it became easier to explain the importance of understanding Ukraine from a Ukrainian perspective without the need to excuse myself or rationalize the approach to my thesis. If anything, being aware of my own positionality led me to engage with the academic debates within Ukrainian and Russian

scholarship, include Russian language written empirical data, and be more critical of Yushchenko and be more open to the ideas of Kuchma and Yanukovych.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined this thesis's theoretical and methodological foundations. I positioned this research within the broader scholarly landscape that has emerged in response to the events following the 2014 Euromaidan revolution, particularly the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war. While early academic work often employed realist paradigms, recent scholarship has increasingly engaged with ideational approaches, offering more nuanced and interpretive accounts of identity, discourse, and foreign policy. In response to this shift, in this thesis I adopt an interpretivist framework that emphasizes the constructed nature of meaning, national identity narratives, and their relation to foreign policy.

In this chapter, I operationalized the key concepts and assumptions underpinning my research, outlined the methodological choices, and provided justification for using interpretive methods in analyzing a diverse set of cultural and political texts. I also reflected on the importance of my positionality, acknowledging that subjectivity and emotion are not external to the research process but central to its formation and interpretation.

Together, the theoretical orientation and methodological tools presented here provide the framework for the empirical chapters that follow, offering a deeper exploration of how popular and elite narratives of national identity and foreign policy were constructed, evolved, and related to each other in the pre-2014 Ukrainian context and intertwined into its foreign policy.

Chapter 4. Ukraine's National Identity and Foreign Policy, 1994-2004

In this chapter, I present Ukraine's popular and elite identity discourses, their interplay within them, and Ukraine's foreign policy reinterpretation from 1994 to 2004. The primary purpose of this presentation is to contextualize the following decade—from 2004 to 2014—the main period on which this research focuses.

It had been three years since Ukraine regained its independence in 1991. The initial euphoria and thirst for freedom that led an overwhelming majority of 92.3% of voters (D'Anieri, 2019, p. 34)[27] to support the Ukrainian Parliament's declaration of independence had withered. Under pressure from the Ukrainian Parliament, then-president Leonid Kravchuk agreed to an early presidential election as a compromise to resolve the stand-off between himself and the Parliament. In the run-off, a more pragmatic and self-proclaimed reform-oriented Leonid Kuchma defeated Kravchuk and became the only President in Ukraine's recent history to get reelected later in 1999. The 1994 elections showed a sharp yet ostensible divide among voters: the rural western Ukrainians voted for a more nationalistic Kravchuk, and the industrial Southeastern Ukrainians voted for Kuchma, who paid his dues as a rocket science engineer before becoming the CEO of Yuzhmash.[28] As the literature review showed, the divide within the voting geography seemed to support the whole strand of research that presented Ukraine's identity as deeply divided into either pro-European nationalistic Ukrainian-speaking West of Ukraine or pro-Russian Russophone "soviet" Southeast of Ukraine (Riabchuk, 2002; Connolly, 2010; Whitmore, 2014; Shyrokykh, 2018). However, when Kuchma was reelected in 1999, he ran against the communist Petro Symonenko and won with overwhelming support from the West of Ukraine.

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[27] 54.19% of Crimeans voted in favor of independence, and 57.07% in Sevastopol.
[28] Yuzhmash is the leading plant in the rocket-space industry in Ukraine.

In contrast to Symonenko, voters in the West of Ukraine saw Kuchma as less pro-Russian or even not pro-Russian. Out of 24 Ukrainian Oblasts, the openly pro-Russian communist Symonenko only won in 7 center and south Oblasts and Crimea. Donbas, except Luhansk, also showed staunch support for Kuchma, thus illustrating that the West and East were probably not as polarly divided around voting matters and foreign policy preferences as it had been predominantly assumed in research (Kuzio, 1998; Proedrou, 2010; Delwaide, 2011). There could be many explanations as to why Ukrainians chose Kuchma once over the openly pro-European Kravchuk and again over the openly pro-Russian Symonenko. One of the possible explanations, as argued in this chapter, is rooted in the interplay of the narratives reconstructed in the sections that follow.

In this chapter, I look at Ukraine's domestic dynamics from the identity narratives perspective, suggesting that despite noticeable cultural and linguistic diversity, Ukrainians had more in common in their inner world than the divisive external features as popularly presumed in research on Ukraine before 2014. In this chapter, I show how the Ukranian self-identity found in popular narratives and reflections found in elite discourses were constructed, as well as interacted with each other in a way that led to the Orange Revolution in 2004 with the victory of the pro-European Viktor Yushchenko.

For this chapter, I used a wide selection of empirical data to discover and recreate overarching and reoccurring identity meta-narratives found across and within the data I assess. To reconstruct popular meta-narratives, I cross-read the four most popular novels of the decade that won state prizes and were voted the best book of the year by ordinary Ukrainians. Additionally, I watched three movies and an anthological triptych appraised and appreciated by the public. To reconstruct elites' narratives on Ukraine's identity and foreign policy, I read Kuchma's memoirs, a collection of his speeches addressed to the Parliament, foreign officials, and the Ukrainian public, and the book in which he reflects on Ukraine and

Russia's distinct identities and relations. Newspaper articles from *Den* and *Fakty,*[29] selected at regular intervals—two issues per month between 1997 and 2004[30]—complemented the reconstruction of both popular and elite narratives.

In what follows, I present and interpret four main meta-narratives that intertwine and qualify Ukraine's popular identity embroidery. Then, I reconstruct prominent elite discourses, which overlap, complement, and contest those of the general public. In the end, I argue that the interplay of the popular and elite discourses consequently informed Ukraine's foreign policy.

Popular meta-narratives of Ukraine's identity

The meta-narratives discussed in this chapter were mainly reconstructed from cross-reading of the four most famous novels published from 1994 to 2004, which are *Stalinka* by Oles Ulianenko (1994), *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* by Oksana Zabuzhko (1996), *The Daily Warder* by Yevhen Pashkovsky (1999), and *The Moscoviad* by Yurii Andrukhovych (2000). These novels were written in the postmodern "stream of consciousness" style (Chernetsky, 2007, p.203; Rewakowicz, 2017, pp.103, 167). James (1892, p. 151) was the first to claim that as a literary technique, stream of consciousness "is employed to evince subjective as well as objective reality. It reveals the character's feelings, thoughts, and actions, often following an associative rather than a logical sequence, without commentary by the author." More to the point of this thesis and the novels' style, Humphrey (2020, p. 36) argued that "the purpose of interior monologue is, first of all, to communicate inner identity". The fact that the four

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[29] Den (The Day) is a daily newspaper published in Ukrainian and Russian since 1997 and in English weekly since 1998. Fakty (The Facts) is a daily newspaper (published weekly since 2018); before 2022, it was only published in Russian.
[30] Due to accessibility problems in completing archives, I could not assess earlier issues.

most popular novels of this decade were all written in the stream of consciousness style filled

with interior monologues shows the closeness of mutual experiences, feelings, thoughts, and

attitudes shared by the writers and the readers.

Two common traits were noticed throughout all four novels. First and most notable

was that the protagonists' reflections on their own lives, experiences, struggles, and failures

mirrored and interweaved those of the nation. The observation that "the private and the public

become inextricably intertwined" (Rewakowicz, 2017, p.19) in these post-Soviet texts is

supported by the analysis of the same texts by Vitaly Chernetsky:

> The private, personal experiences of displacement emerge here as an allegory
> of the collective experience of the Ukrainian people during this time of
> paradigmatic change, thereby evidencing a profound affinity […] with
> Jameson's model of "national allegory," one of the influential, if frequently
> criticized, attempts at constructing a theoretical model of postcolonial writing
> (Chernetsky, 2007, p. 226).

Jameson's claim that "the story of the private individual destiny is *always*[31] an allegory of the

embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (Jameson, 1989, p. 69) is

theoretically problematic on the grounds of its claim for universal applicability (Rewakowicz,

2017, p.19). However, this is undoubtedly the case for the works analyzed in this chapter.

The protagonists projected their own experiences and self-reflections on those of the whole

nation, and by doing so, the authors helped reconstruct the narratives that arguably resembled

the public's inner world (Hrycak, 2009, pp. 309-330). This validifies my case as I use popular

novels to reconstruct Ukraine's national identity.

The second trait observed in all four novels was the absence of clear-cut exclusive

parameters of Ukrainian identity and exclusivizing narratives about what it means to be

Ukrainian, let alone "Western" or "Eastern" Ukrainian. The public's self-reflective narratives

did not contain much, if any, support for the entrenched deep binary divide, which used to be

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[31] Emphasis added. While the wording "third-world" is not particularly appropriate nowadays, it is what
Jameson used when discussing certain parts of the world.

emphasized by many scholars. However, these were all novels that dealt with the complexity

of Ukrainian identity. Despite what seemed to be spiraling and repetitive soliloquies because

the stream of consciousness, according to Dainton, it "is not a mosaic of discrete fragments of

experience, but rather an interconnected flowing whole" (Dainton, 2000, p. i). In these texts,

the identities, as Chernetsky notes:

> […] intertwine into a tangled web, a veritable rhizome of continuous
> ephemeral couplings and breakdowns. There is no identifiable condition of
> belonging that unites them all; they are truly "whatever singularities," in
> Agamben's terminology, united by nothing but belonging itself. Their
> community is both expansive and incomprehensible (Chernetsky, 2007, p.
> 221).

Instead, self-identification issues, interior monologues and dialogues, debates, explorations of

trajectories of self-identification of postcolonial Ukrainians, and openness to self-question

and self-doubt were spotted throughout the texts in a mode of reflective meta-narratives. In

her novel, Zabuzhko appealed to "a national inferiority complex" (1996, p. 28), a position

shared and expanded by Pashkovsky's reflections throughout his writing:

> And you will think about the sad fate of the land - to thresh after all! Why did
> it happen that we were overtaken by other peoples, who took away the harvest
> from here sixty-four years ago, and now gave us beads of civilizations, mirrors
> of universal freedoms, equality, and hope for prosperity? (p. 5). You will be
> forgotten, and you will be fooled, you will be made guilty, you will apologize
> and apologize to the Russians for the fuel consumed, to the Germans for the
> lack of culture, to the Jews for the policemen, to the Americans for the lack of
> racism, to the Japanese for the Kuril Islands, to the developed ones for your
> disability. And you will thank them, thank them, thank them for listening to
> you, paying attention to you, taking away nuclear weapons (Pashkovsky,
> 1999, p.100).

That being said, it is essential to note that there were a firm understanding that Ukraine's

identity, whatever that may have been, was undeniably distinct and separate from that of

Russia. The novel writers positioned themselves not only in an anti-colonial and anti-Russian

but also in a postcolonial dimension, inviting the audience to rediscover their Ukrainian roots

and identity. As Pavlyshyn noted, "It argued that what one needs after colonialism was post-

colonialism. Anti-colonialism, the simple negation of colonial values and postulates, was not

enough: one needed both distance from, and continuing awareness of, the colonial heritage and the tradition of opposition to it" (Pavlyshyn, 2002, p. 154).

If one had to use just one word to describe the decade's penetrative leitmotif, it would be the idea of living in and being a paradox, as the narratives contained contradictory ideas, feelings, and attitudes. Four main interrelated meta-narratives became evident as the primary sources were read intertextually: *enthusiastic fatalism*, *disoriented irreversibility*, *audacious fearfulness*, and *marginal ambivalence*.

Narrative 1: *Enthusiastic fatalism*

> Eastern fatalism, oh yes—the Russians have it, too; we're in worse shape, we, actually, are neither here nor there, Europe has managed to infect us with the raving fever of individual desire, faith in our personal "Yes I can!"—however, we never developed a foundation for such faith, those structures that might support that "I can!" and thus have tussled about for ages at the bottom of history—our Ukrainian "I can!" helpless and alone. Amen.
> *Excerpt from Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex by Oksana Zabuzhko*

It is not surprising that people in Ukraine felt doomed in the mid-90s and early 2000s. Nevertheless, the degree to which this idea prevailed over anything else is astonishing. Hyperinflation at 10,115% (Aslund, 2009, p. 47), unemployment at over 40%, as well as debt, new market structures, and privatization were reasons people felt lost (Kuzio, 1995, pp. 38-40). Both the working class and newbie businesspeople were in the same ocean of desperation. The former still lived in their old communal apartment buildings, and the latter managed to acquire their own housing through privatization. From farmers in the West to miners in the East, people had to face the desperate reality of their lives (Kravchenko, 2015).

Ulianenko's *Stalinka* depicted this consuming feeling of desperation and fatalism particularly well, as the novel started with the mentally ill protagonist, Jonah, escaping from a poorly maintained mental hospital. His freedom turned illusive as he realized that life in the

free world was even more depressing. A parallel storyline of a dysfunctional family contributed to portraying a decaying society living in disheartened communities. People spent their days drunk, trying to escape the realities of their lives. Crimes, drugs, and abusive behavior were the norm in this district to the degree that "crying for us is all God does" (Ulianenko, 1994, p. 188). This made Jonah feel "like a nobody, like a nothing, like the solitude of his growing up, the solitude of the quiet garden from his childhood when the light of the Milky Way gets lost in the folds of the brain; and aside from a burning grief and sadness there is nothing" (Ulianenko, 1994, p. 266). Pashkovsky said, "Everyone's life is tragic, but the continuous tragedy of the whole nation inspires despair in objects and places; abomination and decency intertwine in mockery of the resemblance of a person" (Pashkovsky, 1999, p. 42). For him, Ukraine is a place where "it is impossible neither to live nor to die" (Pashkovsky, 1999, p. 46).

Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* complemented this narrative by repeatedly confessing that the "Ukrainian choice is a choice between nonexistence and an existence that kills you" (Zabuzhko, 1996, p. 22) and once again, "our only choice, therefore, was and still remains between victim and executioner: between nonexistence and an existence that kills you" (Zabuzhko, 1996, p. 158). She was also pessimistic about the whole of Ukrainian identity:

> all that Ukrainians can say about themselves is how, and how much, and by which manner they were beaten: information, I must say, is not very enticing for foreigners, nonetheless, if there's nothing else in either your family or your national history that can be scraped together, we slowly but surely began to take pride in this—hey, come see how they beat us, but we're not yet dead[32] (Zabuzhko, 1996, p. 52).

Andrukhovych reflected that "this is where the Empire's misfortune lies, in deciding to combine the uncombinable, the Estonians with the Turkmen. And where are we, the

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[32] This alludes to the first line of Ukraine's national anthem, "The glory and freedom of Ukraine have not yet perished."

Ukrainians, on its map? Somewhere in the middle? This is no consolation" (Andrukhovych, 2000, p. 53). He regrettably admitted that "you can't choose history. But it could have been different" (Andrukhovych, 2000, p. 88).

Despite such a clear sense of fatalism, there was a whispering sentiment and enthusiastic longing for hope and a future. Jonah remarked, "he who has not seen the light has not been in the dark, and he who has lived in the dark has seen the light" (Ulianenko, 1994, p. 182). *Stalinka* ended with Jonah having the ability to love and forgive and believing he still had time to change. Zabuzhko's character acknowledged that she "always wanted only one thing—to reach her full potential" (Zabuzhko, 1996, p. 28), and later, she asked the reader, "What exactly does it mean—to reach your full potential?" (Zabuzhko, 1996, p. 35). She then asked again, rhetorically, "is despair not too great a luxury for Ukrainians who, after all, were granted for the first time this century a realistic chance of leading a full life?" (Zabuzhko, 1996, p. 48). Andrukhovych reminded himself of hope-giving and calling to action words: "Knock at the door, and it will open. For it opens for the one who knocks. […] because nearby there is also a door to which you simply didn't pay attention earlier" (Andrukhovych, 2000, p. 43).

Narrative 2: *Disoriented irreversibility*

> This is why I am for the full and final separation of Ukraine from Russia! Long live the unshakeable friendship between the Ukrainian and the Russian people! Believe me, there is no contradiction between these two phrases. I wish the great Russian people prosperity and flourish! To your and our beer!
> *Excerpt from The Moscoviad by Yuri Andrukhovych*

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Ukrainians seemed to have found themselves at the crossroads of history. While people were confused about where to go and what was about to happen, one thing was clear: a return to any unions or alliances with Russia was out of the

discussion. Active departure and complete separation from Russia was the only sure path for Ukraine. The questions of what Ukraine should be and where it should go next remained open, with a slight hint of the need to rediscover its own identity and vague allusion to its Europeanness. These questions did not seem to matter as much as the desperate need for an irreversible departure from Moscow.

At the end of the 1997 movie *Three Stories*, a little girl poisoned her wheelchair-bound grandfather because of his inability to do what she wanted. He knowingly and willingly took the poison and said: "We need to liquidate the old and weak." This was the time for the old to pass and give space for something new. In the scene, the girl's poisoning of her grandfather—with his consent—can be interpreted not simply as an act of violence, but as a metaphor for the deliberate rejection of the past to make way for a new beginning. The grandfather's acceptance reflects the ambivalence with which older identity frameworks may confront their own obsolescence in the face of changing realities. It serves as a powerful metaphor for generational rupture and the deliberate abandonment of the past. In the context of Ukraine before 2014, this reflects the tension between lingering Soviet-era identity structures and emerging, Western-oriented narratives that demanded a symbolic break from the old order. Foreign policy, in this light, becomes not merely strategic but a performative arena where national identity is renegotiated through the rejection or preservation of competing historical legacies.

The impossibility of sustaining old structures and ideas, and the irrevocable exodus from the Soviet Empire and past, were prominent throughout the novels read for this research. While escaping KGB agents, Andrukhovych's protagonist "ran twelve steps down and found another door, twice as massive, with a biblical-sounding inscription, 'BEFORE OPENING THIS DOOR, MAKE SURE THAT THE PREVIOUS DOOR IS CLOSED!!!'" (Andrukhovych, 2000, p. 120).

The novels' narrative of the fallen and non-rebuildable Soviet and Russian empires was prominent. Zabuzhko depicted a scene where her main character ran away from a Russian rapist she met on the train to Warsaw. She prematurely jumped off the train and found safety in the arms of a Polish police officer, as "she practically threw herself on his chest, hugging him like a brother" (Zabuzhko, 1996, p. 41). Ulianenko's *Stalinka* was practically built around the idea of escapism: escaping from a mental hospital, escaping from reality through alcoholism, escaping from past hurts, as well as escaping from Stalin-era mentality, Stalin-style urban spaces, and Stalin-like leaders. Pashkovsky illustrated this fusion of being disoriented and yet knowing that the past was irreversible in his *Daily Wander*: "I never resurrected, because I did not die; I did not die, but only changed the houses where I lived, diversified my habits, changed the way I walk, amused myself with the complex stuffing of nations and races, subjugated the left hand with my right one, reigned as emperor and dictator, stirred up eras, poured turmoil and revolutions into the cauldron of history - I did all the things that will never be done again" (Pashkovsky, 1999, p. 12). Andrukhovych's *Moscoviad* ended with the protagonist, who had his plane ticket stolen by a KGB officer, finally making it onto the train from Moscow to Kyiv. He only managed to travel on a third-level bunk[33] in a third-class car. As he was finally resting, he concluded:

> Moscow no longer existed. […] Sometimes we dream of Europe. At night we come to the banks of the Danube. […] Since tonight I am not running away but coming back. Angry, empty, and with a bullet in my skull to top it all off. Why the hell would anyone need me? I don't know that either. I only know that now almost all of us are like this. And what remains for us is the most persuasive of all hopes, passed on to us from our glorious ancestors—that it will work out somehow. The main thing is to survive until tomorrow. To make it to the station called Kyiv. And not to fucking fall off this bunk on which I am now completing my unsuccessful round-the-word journey (Andrukhovych, 2000, pp. 187-189).

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[33] The third-level bunk is a storage space for matrasses, keeping trash, and animal cage transportation. These bunks do not have allocated seating, and there are no tickets to purchase them. This illustrates the desperate desire to leave Moscow by any means possible.

Apart from Andrukhovych's key point about the departure from Moscow, there was a clear understanding that Ukrainians were going back home and needed to rediscover their historical roots. This hint suggests that, possibly, Europe was what Ukraine should pursue now. Yet, there was a high level of uncertainty about whether Europe would want Ukraine.

Narrative 3: *Audacious fearfulness*

> So, always be afraid of the gifts of a Muscovite: it is either taken from an orphan or stolen from a poor person. Beware of people who speak English well and do not use Moscow's profanity.
> *Excerpt from Daily Wander by Yevhen Pashkovsky*

Fearfulness was another common meta-narrative identified in all novels. The fear of the past in *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, the fear of the present in *Stalinka*, the fear of possible betrayal by the West in *Daily Warder*, and the fear of possible Russian invasion in *The Moscoviad* intertwined and complemented each other. This encompassing fear stemmed from past experiences and national low self-esteem, or as Zabuzhko called it, a "national inferiority complex" (Zabuzhko, 1996, p. 28). In the first reading, the protagonists seemed to dramatize the past and overthink the future. However irrational their fears may seem, it became evident that after the initial excitement over regaining independence, people had time to process and reflect on their reality. Reading these novels in the light of the events of 2022 onwards, when the most daunting fear materialized, provided a deeper insight into why this meta-narrative mattered and was so profound.

Zabuzhko's character compared the dissolution of the USSR to a divorce after an abusive marriage, and described her mental condition and, at the same time, the mental state of liberated Ukraine in this way:

> Each nation goes crazy in its own way—and in order to describe my depression, which actually falls under a different name—I've already managed, willy-nilly, to pick up a little terminology familiar to them: "broken

relationship" and moreover "straight after a divorce," and moreover "sexually traumatic," and from there summoning psychiatric textbooks to my aid: "fear of intimacy, fear of frigidity, suicidal moods"—in a word, a classic case, not even worth going to a psychiatrist (Zabuzhko, 1996. p.19).

After the "divorce," she was left with the emotional baggage of fear that took over to the point of suicidal thoughts. Having been traumatized, she feared intimacy, which may have led to the fear of committing to a new relationship, which alludes to Ukrainians being hesitant about going all in with the EU. The fear of the past took control over her possible future, as she needed time to heal and begin trusting others again. And even if she did find somebody else, she was afraid of her ex's retaliation because, as she reflected a page further,

a betrothed woman is attractive to all: that's the part that really seduces them, forces them to flare with nostrils dilated by fury and pound the ground with their hooves—the spirit of competition, the desire to win, the challenge to a duel, the silent call of the bugle to battle that vibrates the air, the insatiable need to prove superiority over all others (Zabuzhko, 1996, p.20).

Later in the novel, she elaborated more on the origins of Ukrainians' inherent feeling of fear:

Fear came early. Fear was passed on in the genes; one was to fear all beyond the immediate family circle—anyone who expressed any degree of interest in you was, in fact, spying for the KGB to find out what's really going on at home and then those bad men will come again and put Daddy in prison. Especially suspected were those who tried to strike up 'liberal' conversations (Zabuzhko, 1996, p. 63).

The experiences of the authoritarian past, especially when it came to liberal ideas, had a firm grip on Ukrainians even several years into regaining independence. It had different effects on how people felt in their present. For instance, Jonah was so overcome with fear that on encountering a new free life, he "wanted the worst thing he could possibly want: he wanted to return to the madhouse" (Ulianenko, 1994, p.32). This reflects the common fear-driven desire to return to one's old comfort zone for those who had been in toxicity and now

are afraid to have a new start. However, Jonah overcame his fear and not only did not return to the mental hospital, but also established his life in the free world.

After the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the fears of Andrukhovych's protagonist do not seem as irrational as they would have appeared in 2000. He sneaked into a meeting attended by seven masked people who symbolized the most influential Russian and Soviet leaders, such as Ivan the Terrible, Catherine the Great, Lenin, Suvorov, and others. They were discussing the future of newly independent republics and plotting to rebuild Derzhava or the State:

> We will grant them their, excuse my vocabulary, cherished independence. We will teach them to win referendums. For a referendum is an ideal way to manipulate people while maintaining their illusion of having chosen their fate on their own. We will teach them to love the State. And this means—to love violence, deceit, and corruption. We will grant them complete freedom to drive themselves into the abyss. […] We are always ready to come to the defense of the local Russophone population. We will turn Poland into a firing range from one sea to another, and flood Finland with vodka. We will abolish their anti-alcohol laws, declaring them to be in violation of basic human rights (Andrukhovych, 2000, pp.174-177)!

This rant went on for several pages detailing how Moscow would regain its now independent neighboring nations. Derzhava, a concept well-known in the Russian Empire and prominent in the first line of the Russian Federation's national anthem, was a key notion through which Russia exercised control over its colonies in the early 20th century and earlier. Even though Andrukhovych did not explicitly address the feeling of fear, it was evident that his protagonist was terrified the Russian leadership's schemes. The threat of the Empire making a comeback led the protagonist to assassinate all seven figures. Acknowledging close cultural connections between Ukraine and Russia, the promise "to come to the defense of the local Russophone population" (Andrukhovych, 2000, p. 175) was especially petrifying. Even though the theme of fear borderline with paranoia was prominent, the protagonists in all four novels managed to survive the hardships, "heal," and, if not overcame, at least learned to live with the fear and move on with their lives.

As this fear was paradoxically audacious, this narrative is not just about fear—it's about overcoming fear or, at the very least, learning to live with it. This suggests that Ukrainians, having baggage from the "relationship" with Russia, were very cautious in making commitments to new partnerships, and all agreements and promises were seen as traps.

Narrative 4: *Marginal ambivalence*

> Drinking themselves into a stupor, the two of them would sit in a cubbyhole
> and sing sad Ukrainian songs, ending with the *Internationale*.
> *Excerpt from Stalinka by Oles Ulianenko*

Regarding values such as tolerance, gender equality, social acceptance, and cultural diversity, Ukraine does not seem to be one of the leading nations in Europe. Given the country's Christian background, communist past, and surface ethnic homogeneity, Ukrainians seem to have more conservative, patriarchal, and traditional values than Western Europeans. Indeed, quantitative comparative research on the identity of Ukrainians conducted by the Razumkov Center in 2017 found that 62% of Ukrainian respondents said they did not trust (completely or mainly) people of other nationalities, 65% did not trust people of other religions, and 67% would not want to live next door to homosexuals (Razumkov Center, 2017, p. 4). However, there are some contradictions in the study's results. Only 12% of respondents said they would not want to live near people of another race,[34] 7% would not want to live next door to people who spoke a different language[35] or people of another religion,[36] and only 3% would not want to be neighbors with couples living together but not

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[34] This is less than in Russia (17%) and Germany (15%), yet higher than in Poland (6%) and the Netherlands (8%).
[35] Higher tolerance was found only in Poland, 3%.
[36] Lower results were found in the Netherlands (3%) and Poland (5%).

married.[37] The level of intolerance against immigrants in Ukraine (20%) was about the same as in the Netherlands (20%) and Germany (21%), lower than in Russia (32%), and higher than in Poland (7%) (Razumkov Center, 2017, p. 23).

Such contradictions suggest ambivalence and ambiguity towards people of other nationalities, languages, religions, and sexual minorities. Judging from the age groups of the respondents, younger Ukrainians nationwide were more tolerant of immigrants, people of other faiths, and people speaking different languages. This tendency assumes that back in 1994-2004, people in Ukraine had more intolerant attitudes toward the abovementioned groups. However, cross-reading the novels and reflections on the decade's movies did not support this assumption. On the contrary, the reconstructed meta-narratives aligned with the contradictions found in the Ruzumkov study.

One of the characters in *Stalinka* was a gay man who was also casually mentioned to be a Baptist Christian[38] and treated with respect. *The Moscoviad* protagonist, in his lamentation over his friend's death, said, "You radiated light, oh Ruslan the Handsome, and your muscles were magical! If I were gay, I'd do anything to sleep with you, my brother!" (Andrukhovych, 2000, p. 28). Later, he noted a post-Soviet dynamic within society and concludes, "There seem to be so many gay guys around lately—they must be sensing the approaching changes in the legislation and display their inclinations with an increasing openness." (Andrukhovych, 2000, pp. 106-107). In the movie *Three Stories*, a gay man lived in a communal apartment, sharing it with neighbors whose attitudes towards him ranged from insults to complete indifference. In the 2004 movie *The Tuner*, an openly gay security guard worked at a supermarket, and nobody seemed to show any intolerance toward him. Articles in *Den* and *Fakty* covered changes in the West regarding marriage equality progress from either

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[37] Higher tolerance was found only in the Netherlands, 0.6%.
[38] Baptist Christians, just like any other non-Orthodox or Catholic Christians, were highly demonized, persecuted, and outlawed in the USSR.

neutral or positive perspectives (Fakty, 2000; Den, 2001). However, *Daily Warder* and the 1997 movie *The Dead Man's Buddy* contained some amount of derogative language concerning the LGBT community.

Several other aspects of social ambivalence were found in the novels and movies. Deprioritizing people's social status was one of them. *Stalinka* depicted a war hero buried in the cemetery next to an ex-con. In all novels, the Christian faith was not limited to the Eastern Orthodox version. Many Bible references and spiritual practices were mentioned in a down-to-earth manner, and most of them were used sarcastically. Most characters believed in a God as a Supreme Power in a nonspiritual and even post-Christian way, not necessarily a Christian, let alone Catholic or Eastern Orthodox interpretation.

Another aspect of social change was feminist sentiments, such as women being breadwinners (*The Dead Man's Buddy*), women taking control of their lives (*The Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex, The Dead Man's Buddy, The Tuner*), as well as the apparent linguistic and grammar features like choice of feminitives that indicated the authors' awareness of this matter and their stance on the issue.

The Moscoviad portrayed its main character as fluent in languages and enjoying the company of people of different nationalities and backgrounds. He drank beer with his buddies and appreciates the ethnic diversity of his friends. He straightforwardly denied accusations of being a nationalist. A *Den* article from October 23, 1999, talked about "marginal culture" in Ukraine, emphasizing its bilingualism without any negative connotations. *Daily Warder*, on the contrary, included bits of a racial slur but only in the context of the protagonist feeling offended and wronged by the West and Russia. People in all movies spoke predominantly in Russian. However, whenever someone spoke Ukrainian, there was no tension between the people, and the conversation would continue in both languages. When it came to issues such

as abortion, cohabitation, having children out of wedlock, and dating ethnically non-Ukrainian people, they were treated with either indifference or tolerance.

It is essential to emphasize a complete lack of any signs of the internal binary divide among Ukrainians as being meaningful when it came to issues such as language, ethnic origin, religion, place of birth, or calls for radical or nationalistic uprisings in all novels, movies, and newspaper articles of the decade of 1994-2004. While the differences were recognized, they had little divisive meaning and significance. Several newspaper articles suggested a demand for broader public usage of the Ukrainian language. On January 30, 1998, *Den*'s article talked about the Weimar Republic that failed and opened doors for the Nazi regime and warned about the dangers of possible radical and nationalistic movements in Ukraine, arguing that most countries that are developing well are social-democratic, social-liberal, and Ukraine should follow their path. January 24, 2004, *Den*'s article boldly stated that in Ukrainian society, "the words 'national' and 'nationalist' cause a reaction of categorical rejection." The same article, however, argued that "the only salvation for Ukraine can only be a firm national policy. That is, not chauvinism, not fascism, but Ukrainian nationalism, which will one day nurture a renewed Ukrainian nation and national state, equal among other nation-states of Europe." This is not to say there were no far-right or nationalistic movements or ideas in Ukraine. Like in any other state, such ideas existed and still do in Ukraine. However, to date, there has been very little demand for them. Most parties elected to Parliament, apart from the Communist Party of Ukraine, were center-right, social-democratic, and social-liberal parties. In the history of Ukrainian Parliament, nationalist parties were elected only twice, and their marginal victory did not let them inform or influence the Parliament's agenda in any significant way. After Crimea's annexation in 2014, two far-right presidential candidates received fewer votes combined than a pro-Russian Jewish candidate from Odesa.

What would such a mix of *enthusiastic fatalism, disoriented irreversibility, audacious fearfulness,* and *marginal ambivalence* shared among the people mean for expectations about how Ukraine should relate to the rest of the world? First of all, at this stage, to ask whether Ukrainians were pro-European or pro-Russian is to pose the wrong question, because these identities orient Ukrainians toward the outside. The actual question Ukrainians faced was what it meant to be Ukrainian in and of itself, without reference to other places. The predominant discourses on national identity in Ukraine in this decade did not address the question of whether Ukrainians were or should have been pro-EU or pro-Russia at all. The main question that people discussed was what it meant to be Ukrainian in a state that had just regained its independence. They wanted to recover from the "national trauma" after the Soviet regime and centuries of Russification and, at the same time, to rediscover who they were. However, it is important to acknowledge the obvious message that Ukrainians were not Russians, and they really did not want to do much with Russia if it meant any reunification with the Russian Federation. So much so that most of the time, Ukrainian identity was framed in "anti-Russian" and post-colonial terms. There was a degree of uncertainty about the Europeanness of Ukrainian identity and future that comes across as a lack of self-confidence and as if Ukrainians had a shared national inferiority complex.

These narratives suggest that Ukrainians were returning home and seeking to reconnect with their historical roots, suggesting that Europe might be the path Ukraine should follow. However, significant uncertainty about whether Europe was willing to embrace Ukraine remained, which in turn suggests a degree of hesitation of being rejected or abused as Ukraine was by Russia in the past. Also, these narratives suggest the view that it was easier and more tempting for Ukraine to go back to the past they thought they knew rather than decisively pursue new relations with the EU. Ukraine's past experiences with the Russian Empire and the USSR created an insecure attachment style that prompted hesitation

and restraint in Ukraine's foreign policy. However, despite this fear, Ukraine, inconsistently yet persistently, was making its way to Europe, intending to sign the EU Association Agreement in November 2013.

Elite identity meta-narratives

In this section, I focused on Kuchma's narratives. I cross-read his memoir "*About the Most Important*" (1999), a collection of his speeches from 1994 to 2000 titled *"I Believe in the Ukrainian Nation"* (2000), and his reflections in the book *"Ukraine is not Russia"* (2003). Articles from public newspapers also contributed to understanding Kuchma's narratives.

Two contraintuitive things especially stood out when reading Kuchma's thoughts and speeches. He comes across as significantly more self-aware as a Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian person than he was commonly assumed by the Ukrainian public and portrayed in research (Kuzio, 1998; Proedrou, 2010; Delwaide, 2011). In my view, his declared foreign policy preferences were as pro-European as they could have been at that time. The literature review showed that most scholars assessed his pro-European orientation as merely declarative (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015) and argued that he pursued a multi-vector foreign policy (D'Anieri, 2019) or even "balancing" between the West and Russia (Smith, 2016). Surprisingly, as the following section shows, his narratives contained many clear pro-Ukrainian and pro-Western ideas and stances. One may argue that he was only saying, but not meaning these ideas. However, when his narratives are compared with those of the broader public, there is a strong impression that he at least sought to appear sincere and that he believed in what he was preaching. Taking a pro-European foreign policy vector that stemmed from his national self-awareness illustrates that this was his reality, and he believed

it to be true for him and Ukraine. His accomplishments in European integration during his

presidency are a different story, written not only by his intentions and wishes but also by

domestic challenges and external factors. Retrospectively, it can be argued that Kuchma was

right about Ukraine pursuing a European future more than he has been given credit for by the

previously done research that presented him as balancing between the West and Russia.

Several main themes consistently emerged in Kuchma's writings. For the purposes of

this chapter, immediate attention will be given to those directly addressing issues of national

identity and foreign policy. These meta-narratives are the *irreversible past, uncertain present,*

European future, and *pragmatic pluralism*.

Narrative 1: *Irreversible past*

> The Ukrainian people made their choice unequivocally on December 1, 1991,
> when they almost unanimously voted for independence and their own
> statehood in a nationwide referendum. As the President of Ukraine, I declare
> that there is no way back.
> *Excerpt from Kuchma's speech "Democratic Ukraine in modern*
> *European context" at International Geneva Conferences, March 21, 1996*

If there were many things unclear and uncertain for President Kuchma during

economic instability, one thing was crystal clear: there was no return to the past, whether a

new Soviet Union or reunification with Russia. This theme came up in his memoirs and

speeches noticeably often and straightforwardly. It seemed like he repeatedly emphasized this

to address different audiences. One of his motives for such a strong stance of non-return was

to address particular groups of Ukrainian elites who had leftover sentiments about the

"glorious Soviet past" and ensure they were being watched and warned against any attempts

to reverse Ukraine's independence. He also addressed certain Russian elites who

provocatively disregarded Ukraine's independence and made territorial claims. Kuchma also

signaled his and Ukraine's dedicated departure from the past and openness to new

opportunities to Western politicians. However, he also told this to himself as if it were some mantra to help him accept the new reality, gain closure, and move forward without turning back.

Kuchma's narratives on the irreversibility of Ukraine's vector fell into three dimensions. For him, "communism that has irrevocably gone into the past" (Kuchma, 1999, p. 125) was not going to make a comeback because "[t]he communist project implemented in the USSR contained the most dangerous deception, substitution [of values]" (Kuchma, 1999, p. 136). He did not go as far as to suggest outlawing the Communist Party of Ukraine, as other Eastern European countries did with their national communist parties upon regaining independence from the Soviet Union. He acknowledged that there was an actual electorate that votes for CPU, and these voters deserved to be heard. However, Kuchma thought that people who vote for CPU did not do so because they missed the USSR and adhered to the Communist ideology and values. In doing so, they expressed their displeasure with the current level of life and put their hope into other candidates (Kuchma, 1999, pp. 136-137). He did not necessarily demonize Communism as an ideology in general but addressed how it was implemented in the USSR. Kuchma also warned about the irrational anti-Communism pushback just for the sake of pushback, "We cannot make the same mistake as the communists did and substitute real values with abstract anti-communist ideals" (Kuchma, 1999, p. 137). For Kuchma, Communism, the way it was done in Ukraine during the Soviet times, was not a viable ideology and system for independent Ukraine.

Another dimension of non-return concerned rebuilding a new union with other post-Soviet nations and stemmed from Kuchma's understanding of departure from Communism:

> Communists do not hide that they seek to gain power in the country in order to destroy this country as a subject of international relations and a historical fact. As possible means of destruction, they call for either the mysterious "renewed union of fraternal nations" or the "fraternal Slavic union" – although what is the difference, what is the name of the sulfuric acid in which they also want to

dissolve the state of Ukraine, born of the will of more than 90% its citizens? (Kuchma, 1999, p. 138)

Kuchma argued that the Soviet Empire had irrevocably fallen and could not and should not be repaired (Kuchma, 1999, pp. 11, 103, 201). As Ukraine's elites inherited Soviet habits and administrative approaches, they were not to think of returning to the past and were to escape the Soviet "inertia" (Kuchma, 1999, pp. 174, 323). Alongside the elites, the people of Ukraine, according to Kuchma, were also in this Soviet "inertia" (Kuchma, 2000, p. 417). Kuchma had to rebuild the country from scratch and ensure its regained independence and sovereignty, and Ukraine needed to leave the Soviet past behind.

Lastly, Kuchma's most important and most repeated message was on the impossibility of reunifying Ukraine with Russia. His argument for this stance started with his understanding that Ukraine regained its independence due to people's desire to be free from Moscow nomenclature (Kuchma, 1999, p. 19). Furthermore, despite Russia's unsuccessful support of separatist movements in Crimea in the early 1990s (Kuchma, 1999, pp. 107-108), he warned about Russian politicians who still wanted to take Crimea back (Kuchma, 1999, p. 188). Later in his memoir, he clarified his position on Ukraine-Russia relations:

> Ukraine and Russia should help each other get up from their knees because the Ukrainian and Russian people are brothers. It is unreasonable to debate which of them is an older brother and who is younger - just brothers. Brothers, but not Siamese twins, as the then highest-ranking Russian diplomat said a few years ago. No longer Siamese. The history of medicine knows many cases of the successful separation of Siamese twins so that each could live a fulfilling life every day, make their own friends, and find their purpose. But no one ever tried to sew them back together again. Firstly, it is impossible; secondly, it is unnecessary; thirdly, it will not take root. (Kuchma, 1999, p. 317).

There was no hatred or bitterness towards Russia in Kuchma's writings. He envisioned a world where Ukraine still cooperated with Russia but not at the expense of relations with the West (Kuchma, 2000, p. 35). Given Russia's proximity, it was only pragmatic that fostering mutual respect and cooperation with Russia was in Ukraine's best interest. Once and again, in

his speeches, he affirmed that there was no way back when it came to reuniting with Russia (Kuchma, 2000, pp. 83, 165, 168; Kuchma, 2003, p. xxx). The reasons for this were in the different histories, cultures, languages, and mentalities of Russians and Ukrainians (Kuchma, 2000, pp. 90, 92, 100, 223-224).

An article published in Den on 16 June 1998 reported on an event hosted by Yuri Dubinin, Russia's ambassador to Ukraine, celebrating the Day of the Adoption of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Russia on 12 June—known in Russia as Russia Day. The article, sarcastically titled "*Russian Independence Day in the Capital of Ukraine*," highlighted the tensions surrounding the event. It recounted how Ukrainian MP Vyacheslav Chornovil while shaking hands with Dubinin, said: "Finally, you have become independent from Ukraine." The article went on to say that "However, the omnipresent Nataliia Vitrenko,[39] in turn, also did not deny herself the pleasure of immediately correcting her colleague, wishing further prosperity to Ukrainian-Russian relations" (Den, 1998). The article title and Chornovil's witty remark reverse the typical post-imperial narrative, asserting a Ukrainian-centered perspective on sovereignty and resisting the traditional imperial hierarchy that viewed Ukraine as "the younger brother." At the same time, Vitrenko's comment and how it was narrated to the Ukrainian public exemplify the leftovers of the Soviet inertia of some Ukrainian political elite. The event and its media portrayal suggest that elite discourse operated as a space for negotiating national identity, with foreign policy stances articulated not solely as matters of strategy but as competing narratives about the nation's identity and its place in the world. The tone and framing of the coverage imply alignment with Chornovil's

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[39] Nataliia Vitrenko was a vocal anti-EU and anti-NATO Ukrainian MP who served from 1995 to 2002. As the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (PSPU), she promoted a pro-Russian political agenda. Following the 2002 parliamentary elections, the PSPU failed to secure re-election and lost political relevance. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Vitrenko publicly blamed the war on the United States and the United Kingdom and defended Russian aggression. Subsequently, the PSPU was officially banned in Ukraine due to its pro-Russian stance.

forward-looking, decolonial perspective, while implicitly critiquing Vitrenko's inclination toward a return to the past.

Kuchma's narrative of the *irreversible past* overlapped and complemented the popular narratives of *disoriented irreversibility* and *audacious fearfulness*. Just like in the narratives reconstructed from the popular novels and movies, Kuchma absolutely rejected any possibility of going back to Russia aside from respectful and mutually beneficial cooperation as equals. Ukrainians' disorientation overlapped with Kuchma's understanding that elites and people were still inert. Similarly, he took a very bold, audacious stance against those who entertained the idea of reunification with Russia while still expressing fears that "If tomorrow Russia goes into the Crimea no one will even raise an eyebrow" (Kuzio, 1997, pp. 220-221).

However, Kuchma outright said that Russia had never colonized Ukraine but rather "tried to make [Ukraine] a part of itself" (Kuchma, 2003, p. 147). Meanwhile, the popular literature insisted that Russia was an Empire that culturally subdued Ukraine and might try to revive again. It is safe to assume that Kuchma might have been more limited in what he could write, given that he would have to interact with Russia in one way or another as President. However, he wrote his book *Ukraine is not Russia* in Russian; it was published, translated into Ukrainian, and first presented to the public in Moscow (BBC Russian, 2003). This was the clearest Kuchma could have been in the times of post-independence uncertainty.

Similarly, Kuchma considered Ukraine a new state with occasional references to Kyiv Rus and ancient history. At the same time, popular literature presented Ukraine as a decolonized state that regained independence but not necessarily as a new state. The tension between the popular and elite narratives, which was also present in the following decade, was a possible reason that prompted Ukrainians en masse to protest in 2004 and 2014, when the elites first implicitly (through democracy decline, the rise of authoritarianism, and election

fraud) and then explicitly (by pausing the EU AA deal, and then killing peaceful protestors) tried to reverse Ukraine's course onto Russian trails.

There is enough narrative evidence to suggest that Kuchma was unsure where and what Ukraine was at that grey "transitional" time. He quoted Lina Kostenko, who remains a very influential thinker and popular author in Ukraine: "We live in uncertainty: In the past, they took away our future. In the future, they will give us our past back. So where is our life today?" (Kuchma, 2000, p. 84). He did, however, narrate that Ukraine was a European nation, Central Eastern European, to be exact. He centered Ukrainian culture and identity within the greater European paradigm because the "[c]radle of Ukraine's culture is European Christian civilization. Our home, above all, is Europe. Europe is undivided continuity, a common house for all states and nations that live there" (Kuchma, 2000, p. 140).

Kuchma further affirmed that

[w]e are a European country, and we must strive for integration into European structures to achieve competitiveness precisely at the European level. We are a predominantly Slavic state, and we must strive for economic closeness with our neighbors in the Slavic world, as well as to establish our special role in the system of regional relations in Central and Eastern Europe and the Black Sea-Caucasus region, where we have special interests that need protection, to the establishment and strengthening of the status of a key subregional state (Kuchma, 2000, p. 325).

These thoughts of Kuchma highlight the need for Ukraine and Ukrainians to rediscover themselves and even reinvent themselves within European traditions. At the same time, he was aware of the importance of being pragmatic, another key narrative of Kuchma's discussed later in this chapter. However, the idea was that Ukraine needed to have a fresh start and rebuild itself today, in the present, while looking both at the European past and future.

Kuchma resonated with some ideas from the popular narrative of *disoriented irreversibility* when he said:

> We are talking about our self-identification and our psychology. Ukrainian political scientists and sociologists agree that the consolidation process in the Ukrainian nation is still far from complete. We still have not fully understood who we are. One of the important components of Ukrainian self-identification is precisely contained in the formula "Ukraine is not Russia." It would be entirely unnecessary to proclaim, for example, that Ukraine is not Turkey; this is clear anyway. However, after we and Russia have lived for a third of a millennium under the same state roof - under the Russian roof! - self-identification of Ukrainians in the reviving independent Ukraine is simply impossible without a clear inventory in people's heads and souls: this is Ukraine, and that is Russia (Kuchma, 2003, pp. 23-24).

Kuchma highlighted Ukraine's struggle with national self-identification after centuries of Russian influence, emphasizing the need to distinguish Ukraine from Russia to solidify its independent identity clearly. This resonated with the popular narratives, where Ukrainians grappled with the irreversible break from their past while still navigating the present's uncertainty to fully define their future.

Kuchma's narrative of the *uncertain present* resonated with popular narratives of *enthusiastic fatalism* and *marginal ambivalence*. Kuchma was rather enthusiastic about Ukraine's potential and the opportunity to reinvent itself as a European nation, and his commitment to civic national identity aligned with the Ukrainian ambivalence toward external characteristics by which one may have defined themselves. The novelists advocated for a more Ukraine-defined, more Ukrainian, more distinct from Russia, or even anti-Russian identity. Kuchma, on the other hand, while committedly affirming that Ukrainians and Russians were different, did not take the anti-Russia approach as he argued that "[t]he bearers of such ideas do not notice that they are making themselves psychologically dependent on those very people from whom they so passionately dream of distancing themselves, because they are turning "Muscovites" into their main point of reference" (Kuchma, 2003, p. 24). For Kuchma, the main differences between Russia and Ukraine were in geography, economy, structures, and ways of life. He did try to explain that there were mental and immaterial

differences between Russians and Ukrainians, but he did not emphasize them very much; as a result, his main reforms and policies were on the economy. Contrary to that, in popular literature, the main differences were mental and non-material. Kuchma's "Buy Ukrainian" (Kuchma, 1999, p. 242) slogan, an idea that production and manufacturing would unite Ukrainians, versus Yushchenko's "Think Ukrainian" is one of the possible pieces of evidence for why people voted for Yushchenko in 2004 and not Kuchma's protégé – people needed someone who, "thought" Ukrainian and could implement policies that would encourage the development of a more "Ukrainian" identity.

Narrative 3: *European future*

This stemmed from Kuchma's understanding of Ukraine's European identity and the fact that, as his *irreversible past* narrative suggested, there was no way to go back to the past.

> We, the Ukrainian people, have made our choice, and this choice is European, but this does not mean at all that we are ready to make concessions to Europe where our national interests are concerned (Kuchma, 1999, p. 241). Integration through institutional partnerships – integration into the EU is Ukraine's strategic and *conscious* [40]choice (2000, p. 186). European integration is not a matter of choice but time (Kuchma, 2000, p. 198).

Kuchma's narrative about the *European future* was also about Ukraine's sovereignty. Just as Ukraine could not return to being controlled by Russia or Soviet structures and values, in Kuchma's mind, it were not to go the other way and be subordinated to other structures. For him, a European orientation was in Ukraine's future interest, but only as a fully sovereign and equal state. Just as in the case of fostering mutually beneficial and respectful relations with Russia, Kuchma wanted the same with the EU, apart from actual integration into the EU as an equal to other EU member-states.

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[40] This word becomes crucial for popular narratives in the following decade.

While it is important to distinguish between the EU as a political institution and Europe as a construct grounded in values, culture, and tradition, it is equally important to note that Kuchma used the terms "Europe" and "the EU" interchangeably. His positioning of Ukraine within both the geographic and value-based space of Europe was closely tied to his vision of Ukraine's eventual institutional integration into the EU.

This narrative differed from popular narratives, as ordinary people were less vocal and assertive about the European future, mainly because, for them, it was not the question that mattered the most at the time. They were mainly preoccupied with rediscovering the Ukrainian identity that they felt was lost after centuries of Russification and decades of the Soviet regime. Kuchma's *European futur*e narrative matched some themes from popular narratives and hints that Ukraine's future was European. However, ordinary people were less confident about it. However, this narrative became embraced by Ukrainians as it did not contradict their popular narrative of irreversibility to the sphere of Russian influence and spoke to their enthusiasm and audacity to dream for a better future. This interplay encouraged Ukrainians to protest against Kuchma and later Yanukovych when people saw the elite departure from European values and pro-European aspirations.

Narrative 4: *Pragmatic pluralism*

Kuchma's approach to politics and society was based on the ideas of being pragmatic, especially in foreign policy, and pluralism in ideas that Ukrainians should build their state on. His vision for Ukraine's identity took civic conceptualization, as he said that "National identity and idea should not be ethnically determined – this is for third world countries, Ukraine is a European nation, and we need an idea how to enter the world civilization as equals with the leading countries" (Kuchma, 1999, p. 143). There was little to no support in

his writings for Ukraine to be for ethnic Ukrainians only, but he rather welcomed everyone, regardless of their background, into the family of the Ukrainian state. He repeatedly insisted that Ukraine's identity should be civic; ethnicity was not what defined who was and who was not Ukrainian. He argued against the black-and-white spectrum of political ideas. Also, he talked a lot about the need for a joint project for Ukraine; he was open to discussion and debate about what it meant to be Ukrainian and what Ukraine should have been like as a nation-state. Just like in popular narratives, Kuchma was not religious and used words like "prayer" and "God" in a non-religious way.

Kuchma's pluralistic worldview also translated into his foreign policy rhetoric and actions. Just as he wanted to build a new civic and inclusive Ukraine, he had to be pragmatic in his international politics. In his writings, he expressed admiration for Bohdan Khmelnytsky (Kuchma, 2000, pp. 107-117; Kuchma, 2003, pp. 243–256), the leader and first Hetman of the Zaporozhian Cossacks (1648–1657), who remains one of Ukraine's most popular national heroes. Despite criticism of Khmelnytsky's close ties with Russia and the Crimean Tatars, a 2018 survey showed that 73% of respondents viewed him either entirely or somewhat positively (Radio Svoboda, 2018). Kuchma noted that "[p]ragmatism, readiness for reasonable compromises and negotiations were quite organically combined in him with firmness when resorting to military force" (Kuchma, 2003, p. 247). Kuchma drew on Khelnytsky's legacy and foreign policy when he said:

> A unique side of Bohdan Khmelnytsky's activity is securing international political support for the existence of the newborn state. His wisdom, patience, flexibility, and consistency in politics, as well as his diplomatic talent combined with courage and readiness to take both balanced risks and compromises, saved Ukraine more than once. Bohdan Khmelnytsky managed to find optimal solutions in the complex game of political and military forces of Europe, concluding an alliance with some and achieving the neutralization of others. Thanks to this, he achieved recognition of his state by the governments of the Ottoman Empire, the Crimean Khanate, England, Venice, Russia, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Transylvania, Austria, Moldova, Wallachia, Sweden. (Kuchma, 2003, p. 251).

Kuchma's understanding of Ukraine's geopolitical position and historical experiences guided his pragmatic foreign policy, which considered national interests. Considering Ukraine's recently regained independence and an *uncertain present*, Kuchma's vision for Ukraine as an independent and sovereign state was not easily achievable had he not been willing to compromise, be pragmatic, and build multilateral alliances.

This narrative did not directly interact with nor contradict those of the general public. Kuchma's position of societal pluralism aligns with the popular narrative of *marginal ambivalence*. Considering that, on the whole, Ukrainians were "disoriented" and were not directly engaging in the either-Europe-or-Russia debate, but rather were preoccupied with self-rediscovery, it created space for the elite to maneuver in international politics without the need for any binding commitments.

Foreign Policy: multi-vector or multilateral?

From 1994 – 2004, Ukrainians knew who they did not want to be and who they wanted to be in the future, but they did not know who they were in the present. Not knowing who they were in the present was reflected in Ukraine's foreign policy of the time, which made it inconsistently and hesitantly pro-European.

Much research called Kuchma's foreign policy "balancing" or "multi-vector" because it assessed him as not doing much in the pro-western direction and doing too much cooperation with Russia. For this reason, Kuchma's "multi-vector" foreign policy was understood as mainly pro-Russian foreign policy. From his narratives, however, it looked like for him, there was no contradiction in multi-vector, or rather to say multilateral foreign policy, as he believed in pluralism and being pragmatic. Especially considering that during that decade, Russia also cooperated with the West and NATO to varying degrees (McFaul, 2005; Zagorski, 2019), as did Ukraine, and as such it was not a clear-cut case of either being

pro-European or pro-Russian (Kuchma, 2000, p. 450). Kuchma's foreign policies were not mutually exclusive, as they were not part of either the pro-European or pro-Russian debate.

After regaining independence, Ukraine was deeply dependent on Russia's natural resources and trade, and Ukraine could not afford to engage in trade and gas wars with Russia next door. Even after the full-scale invasion in 2022, it took three years for the Baltic states to disintegrate from Russia's power grid (BBC News, 2025). Western European nations pragmatically cooperated with Russia all the way up to the full-scale invasion, and that was not labeled as "pro-Russian" foreign policy. This shows that even the EU states deeply depended on Russia's resources and had to maintain a foreign policy regarding Russia out of their own pragmatic interests just like Ukraine did in the 1990s. Therefore, calling Kuchma's foreign policy either pro-Russian or balancing as if he did not favor European integration is a sign of insufficient decolonization of the research on Ukraine at that time.

Labeling Ukraine's efforts to conduct its multilateral foreign policy as balancing between two great powers in search of a better deal stems from the view that Ukraine was not capable nor deserving of the capability of knowing what was best for it and how to achieve it. The lack of a decolonized perspective on Ukraine's foreign policy during the Kuchma era is also evident in the application of double standards: while trade- and economic-driven cooperation with Russia was interpreted as a pivot to the East in Ukraine's case, similar forms of engagement by EU member states were not subjected to the same judgment. This reveals a failure to recognize Ukraine's foreign policy as shaped by the pragmatic needs of the time, rather than ideological alignment.

Kuchma's "normalization of relations with Russia" (Kuzio, 2001), was a pragmatic position that should be seen through his understanding of Ukraine's distinct identity, the irreversibility of the past, and Ukraine's own future. His position was that "it was not Russia that collapsed, but the USSR; that Russians and Ukrainians are two separate and, in many

ways, dissimilar nations, each with its own culture, speaking related but distinctly different languages; that Ukraine has its own serious past and, I am sure, a future. Its own future" (Kuchma, 2003, p. 11).

It was impossible and unreasonable to expect Kuchma to reject any cooperation with Russia given the timeframes, interdependencies, and the West's relatively warm relations with Russia. Kuchma's "multi-vector" foreign policy had to be multilateral and his so-called "pro-Russian" (Kuzyk, 2015) foreign policy was just foreign policy regarding Russia. It came to what he thought would be the best potential future relationship between Ukraine and Russia—acting towards each other like sovereign, equal countries right beside each other rather than in conflict. The declarative nature of Kuchma's pro-European foreign policy can be reevaluated by his *uncertain present* narrative, which was supported by popular narratives. Also, considering that Ukraine's national identity had been Russified for over three centuries, the Ukrainian elite had been in Soviet-leftover inertia, Ukrainians' "national inferiority complex," and victim mentality, it was unrealistic to expect the people and the elite to boldly move toward the EU right after regaining the independence in 1991.

Conclusion

From cross-readings and data analysis, four key popular narratives emerged. *Enthusiastic fatalism* captured Ukrainians' despair in the 1990s amid economic collapse, hyperinflation, and social instability—dark yet mixed with hope. Literature, such as Oksana Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* and Oles Ulianenko's *Stalinka*, depicted national identity as trapped between victimhood and survival. Despite feeling doomed, Ukrainians held onto a quiet belief in change. *Disoriented irreversibility* reflected Ukraine's firm rejection of the Soviet past and uncertainty about its future. While integration with Russia was decisively dismissed, there was no clear vision of what Ukraine should become. Works like Yuri Andrukhovych's *The Moscoviad* and contemporary films portrayed a nation drifting in transition, shedding its Soviet legacy without a clear destination. *Audacious fearfulness* presented the paradox of deep-seated fear of historical trauma and Russian threats paired with defiance. Literature and movies of the time exposed Ukraine's psychological struggle—free from Soviet rule but haunted by Russian revanchism. In *The Moscoviad*, Andrukhovych's protagonist symbolically assassinated historical Russian figures, embodying these anxieties. *Marginal ambivalence* challenged the rigid East-West divide often overemphasized in research, and instead highlighted Ukraine's cultural and linguistic fluidity and social acceptance. Popular literature depicted overlapping identities, bilingualism, and a general tolerance for diversity despite lingering conservatism.

From Kuchma's memoirs and speeches, four key narratives on national identity and foreign policy emerged. *The irreversible past* emphasized Ukraine's final break from the Soviet Union and rejection of reintegration with Russia. While Soviet influences lingered, Kuchma's *Ukraine is Not Russia* reinforced the nation's distinct path. *The uncertain present* acknowledged Ukraine's struggle to define itself after regaining independence. Though Kuchma viewed Ukraine as culturally and historically European, he recognized ongoing self-

identification and sought to balance internal diversity with gradual European integration. *European future* framed EU membership as inevitable, though Kuchma insisted integration must not compromise sovereignty. Unlike popular narratives focused on rediscovering identity, his vision was explicitly tied to foreign policy and economic strategy. *Pragmatic pluralism* defined Kuchma's governance and diplomacy. Advocating civic over ethnic nationalism, he sought mutually beneficial relations with Russia and the West—often misinterpreted as pro-Russian. However, his multilateralism was shaped by Ukraine's economic and temporal realities rather than ideological alignment.

These narratives, both from the public and elite perspectives, interacted to shape Ukraine's foreign policy between 1994 and 2004. The overall picture was one of a nation firmly rejecting a return to Russia, but struggling with its own identity and the uncertainties of European integration. This interplay set the stage for the Orange Revolution in 2004, when Ukrainians rejected the attempt to return to old ways and demanded a more definitive pro-European course.

Insights into identity and foreign policy

Ukraine's popular identity narratives throughout much of the 1990s were mainly antithetical—people were not sure who they were or where they were going. However, they knew they were not Russian and were moving away from Russia rather than going to it. As a concept, identity is not essentialist and should not be studied as such. Identity is an evolving, changing, and dynamic spectrum with trajectories and moods or modes that can influence the way and direction the identity develops. Identity can have qualities such as i) trajectory—it is not static, but it can be traced as it is evolving, and there is room for maneuvering within identity; ii) inertia—in democratic societies, identity change does not happen rapidly. It takes time to break "old habits" and some triggers to prompt the transition and overcome the

inertia; and iii) valence[41]—a measure of identity capacity to combine with others, absorbing some of their identity qualities as it interacts with them. Suppose identity is assumed to be a dynamic spectrum and studied as a narrative. In that case, it is possible to get a bigger yet more nuanced picture of people's process of self-understanding, how it developed, and how it interacted with the self-identification of the elites.

My interpretation of the narratives' interplay presented in this chapter suggests that Ukraine's foreign policy from 1994 to 2004 was shaped by its ongoing identity transformation. The hesitation in fully embracing European integration was not just about politics—it was about a nation still figuring out who it was. While elites had a vision for Ukraine's European future, popular narratives reflected more profound existential questions that had yet to be answered.

This reinterpretation suggests that foreign policy cannot be divorced from the evolutionary process of national identity. Ukraine's trajectory toward Europe was not a matter of foreign policy alone but of internal cultural and psychological shifts. The victory of the Orange Revolution of 2004 can be seen as the moment when popular identity and elite aspirations finally aligned, resulting in a decisive push toward Europe that would continue into the next decade.

Understanding this dynamic is crucial for policymakers today. Identity shifts take time, and foreign policy strategies should account for the more profound societal transformations that highlight geopolitical decisions. For Ukraine, its journey toward Europe was not just about treaties and agreements—it was about becoming a nation confident in itself, no longer defined by negation but by a clear sense of belonging in the world.

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[41] An idea borrowed from Kuchma (2003, p. 511). A similar dimension of national identity is discussed in Guibernau (2007, p. 189): "National identity has acquired a new dimension that makes it more open and able to include foreign elements without fundamentally changing its core. National identity tolerates a higher degree of hybridity and fuzziness at the margins than in previous times. As the cases considered here, devolution seems to have contributed to taming secessionist claims while fostering the peaceful coexistence of multiple identities within a single state."

Chapter 5. Ukrainian Identity—Popular Meta-narratives, 2004-2014

This chapter presents a recreation of popular identity-related meta-narratives from the analysis of the most popular novels and movies produced around the 2004-2014 decade and commentaries from different newspapers. These meta-narratives tell us something new about how Ukrainians viewed themselves and their country. This is important because it provides a fresh, non-Western perspective on Ukraine's national identity, goes beyond the commonly assumed binary divide, and presents the unifying elements that were embedded in Ukrainian society which drove both revolutions and informed Ukraine's pro-Western foreign policy. After an overview of the main events and changes in this decade, I will provide a brief overview of the sources used for the data collection. Then, I will reflect on continuities in, and differences with, themes from the previous decade. Then, I will present the four most prominent meta-narratives that deal with the developments and conversations about Ukrainian identity from within the popular discourses. Finally, I will theorize how these domestic conversations, continuities, and differences from the previous decade may have informed foreign policy of the time by concluding that the inner world of the Ukrainian people had a direct effect on the elites' change and their consistent actions towards a clearcut pro-European vector during and after the Euromaidan of 2014 (Revolution of Dignity).

Overview of the events, main changes, and their significance

As discussed in the previous chapter, the 1994–2004 decade was filled with mixed uncertainty and hopes for the European future, fear and decisive irreversibility, and pragmatism and inaction for the ordinary people and elites. Ukrainians were preoccupied with questions about who they were and—mainly the elites—how they should move closer to Europe. One clear thing to most was that the past was in the past, and there could not be any

reunification with Russia. If the decade started with a grain of optimism in a reform-oriented pragmatic leader who knew how to get things done, the second half was less than ideal for the President.

During Kuchma's second term from 1999 to 2005, there were several nationwide protests against corruption, the decline of the rule of law, and creeping authoritarianism. A year after being re-elected, the Cassette Scandal, so-called Kuchmagate, broke out after the President was caught on tape ordering the kidnapping and killing of journalist Georgiy Gongadze, whose decapitated body had just been found in the woods. Thousands went to the streets trying to hold the President accountable for this atrocious act. Kuchma struggled to keep his reputation and power and even tried to overrule the Constitution and the Parliament to run for a third term . In late 2003, Ukraine's Constitutional Court ruled that Kuchma could run for a third term in 2004. This decision was seen as another act of corruption and an attempt to recreate Soviet power structures, and it was not well-received by either the Parliament or the people. Ultimately, he decided not to run and endorsed Viktor Yanukovych, the Prime Minister at the time (Kuzio, 2007).

These adverse domestic developments also affected Ukraine's international relations. Western leaders urged Kuchma to have a transparent investigation into Gongadze's murder, and since it did not happen, it severely impacted the West's views on Kuchma and Ukraine (RFE, 2002). This led to Kuchma's closer cooperation with Russia, which greatly bothered the public because people feared joining any Russia-led unions and this was seen as a turn away from Kuchma's narrative of *irreversible past* and people's narrative of *disoriented irreversibility* (Den, 2003). Around the same time, relations between the West and Russia changed from friendly cooperation after 9/11 to growing hostility and confrontation. This became especially prominent after the Baltic states and several former Warsaw Pact countries joined the EU and NATO in 2004, despite Russia's "much more assertive efforts of Moscow

to reestablish its influence in the broader Central and East European region" (Kanet, 2009, p. 12). Then, foreign policy was not a choice between Russia and the West. Now, it started to feel like Ukraine was being dragged by some Ukrainian politicians and Russia into the middle of the big power competition and had to choose a side, which began to concern the Ukrainian public and some policymakers (Raik et al., 2024), as earlier the matter of foreign policy was unanimously pro-European. This rapid shift contributed further to the public's concerns and consequent protest actions.

The 2004 Presidential elections ended with what later became known as the Orange Revolution, as it was the campaign color of Victor Yushchenko, the opposition candidate. After numerous cases of falsification of election results in favor of Yanukovych had been discovered and proved, the second round was ruled void, and an unprecedented third round was set as a compromise. Most Ukrainians did not support Yanukovych as he was Kuchma's protégé and was seen as a danger to the narrative of the irreversibility of the past and its authoritarian structures. People were fed up with Kuchma's inertia, and Yanukovych was seen as continuing it; the reverse of the Soviet practices of covering up corruption and rigid vertical power structures, and the inability to bring Ukraine close to Europe despite Kuchma's straightforward narrative of the *European future*. At this time, millions of people throughout Ukraine went to the streets and squares to support not just Yushchenko but also what they thought he stood for, namely democracy, equality, the rule of law, and the European future (The Guardian, 2004). People's thirst for hope was finally quenched, fear was overcome, irreversibility was reassured, and the elites' uncertainty was replaced by decisiveness.

A Note on Sources and Source Selection

Before I delve into the continuity from the previous decade and the new meta-narratives, I provide a brief overview of the novels, movies, journals, and newspapers I used as my primary sources and contrast them, where possible, with those of the previous decade.

The primary literary sources for this decade were *Sweet Darusia* by Mariia Matios (2004), *The Devil Hides in Cheese* by Yurii Andrukhovych (2006), *Notre Dame d'Ukraine* by Oksana Zabuzkko (2007), *Raven's Way* by Vasyl Shkliar (2009), *Notes of a Ukrainian Madman* by Lina Kostenko (2010), *Travels With Mamayota: In Search of Ukraine* by Artem Chapeye (2011), and *The Remote Space* by Yaroslav Melnyk (2013). In addition to this, I watched the following movies and TV series: *The Company of Heroes* (2004), *Queen of the Gas Station 2* (2005), *Zlydni* (2005), *Orange Sky* (2006), *Kyiv Cake* (2014), and *Maidan* (2014); *Lesya plus Roma* (2005-2006) and *The In-Laws* (2008-2012). I selectively read two monthly issues from *Focus* and *KP in Ukraine* (formerly known as *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Ukraine*) for newspapers.

Two observations regarding the overlaps and similarities among these popular novels published between 2004 and 2014 should be mentioned. Firstly, a strand of novels conveyed retrospective recollections of shared and personal traumatic experiences from the late 19th century to the mid-2000s. *Notre Dame d'Ukraine* reconstructed the image of Lesya Ukrainka, a Ukrainian writer and political and feminist activist. It demythologized how she was portrayed during Soviet times and gave her the credit she deserved. It talked about her personal struggles as a Ukrainian writer and a Ukrainian woman during the Russian Empire when Russification was severely enforced, women did not have equal standing, and any opposing views from intelligentsia were suppressed. However, the concurring conversation directly dealt with the questions of the European origins of Ukraine's national identity,

contrasting it to what the Soviet propaganda made it to be—a rural people with no history and national identity. *Raven's Way* recalled the struggles of insurgent movements, guerilla warfare, partisan divisions, and their fight for independence from the Bolsheviks' Army during the Ukrainian-Soviet War from 1917–1921. In this war, the Ukrainian National Republic lost, and the rest of the territory of Ukraine was incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, marking the beginning of the Soviet occupation. *Sweet Darusia* depicted the traumatic experiences of a Ukrainian family during and after WWII as they were helping the UIA (UPA) in its resistance against Soviet rule. Darusia was an adult woman who lost her ability to speak and was seen by others as mentally challenged. Candies triggered her migraines because, as a child, she was tricked by an NKVD officer[42] who offered her candy to reveal that her parents gave food and shelter to UPA fighters. This led to Darusia's father's arrest and her mother's consequential suicide.

Notes of a Ukrainian Madman focused on Kuchma's progressively authoritarian second term up to the Orange Revolution. The protagonist shared his struggles of being a Ukrainian in the Ukrainian state, where he was looked down upon for just speaking Ukrainian, not wanting to immigrate to the West, and not being able to provide for his family because he refused to concede to corruption. *Notes* contained memories of the protagonist's father being involved in pro-independence movements in the 1960s and consequential persecutions, the traumatic experiences of his wife's family during the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, and the pro-independence youth movements of the early 1990s. All four novels emphasized the importance of knowing national history and trauma, contraposed Ukrainian and Russian/Soviet identities, described collective and individual struggles during the fight for independence (both cultural and national), and showed how indifference and inaction could be catastrophic.

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[42] The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the interior ministry of the Soviet Union.

Secondly, *The Devil Hides in Cheese*, *Notes of a Ukrainian Madman*, *Travels With Mamayota: In Search of Ukraine*, and *The Remote Space* were written in a diary style with the authors' or protagonists' reflections on what was happening in their lives. Apart from *The Remote Space*, a dystopian novel, all other novels were either collections of essays, biographical studies, or historical novels. Both the styles and genres were different from the previous decade, where the four novels analyzed for the 1994-2004 decade were all written in a postmodern "stream of consciousness" style when writers were pouring out their thoughts in a haphazard and hard-to-follow manner. I argue that this significant difference might symbolize a more organized way of thinking and a desire for order, clarity, and consistency. After the initial shock and euphoria of regaining independence, the writers had some breathing space to calm down, organize their thoughts, do some research, reflect on life unrushed, and express their ideas more substantially and argumentatively.

Two observations regarding commonalities among the movies and TV series filmed between 2004 and 2014 are worth noting. Firstly, just as with some novels, quite a few movies described historical events from WWII or the most recent past. *The Company of Heroes,* filmed with the support of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, helped better understand UIA (UPA) and challenged the negative Soviet narrative about it and the way Ukrainians saw it. Also, it reinterpreted the Soviet narrative of WWII and post-WWII history by demythologizing and de-heroizing the Soviet Army and its soldiers. *Orange Sky* and *Maidan* dealt with a more contemporary account of the Orange Revolution, reinforcing the narrative of the importance of civil activism, opposing corruption, and fighting for freedom and the future.

Secondly, the cartoon *Zlydni,* movies such as *Queen of the Gas Station 2* and *Kyiv Cake*, and TV shows *Lesya plus Roma* and *The In-Laws* depicted the ordinary life of ordinary Ukrainians in the modern day. All these were comic and funny representations of interactions

between friends, strangers, family members, and neighbors. One important observation that will be reiterated and developed later concerned the language people spoke. All these movies and TV shows were either predominantly in Russian or bilingual, and full of dialogues where one person spoke Ukrainian and the other Russian, and there was no tension between the speakers.

My last types of data for this chapter were the weekly news magazine *Focus,* with a circulation of over 39,000, and the newspaper *KP in Ukraine,* published six times a week with a circulation of 1 million. Both were published in Russian during the timeframe of this project. As the novels were written in Ukrainian, and the movies and TV shows were bilingual, I chose the newspapers published in Russian to ensure a linguistic balance and widespread access to public discussion. Except for very few of the 480 articles, there was a clear alignment with the meta-narratives reconstructed from the novels and movies.

Continuity and Discontinuity of Meta-narratives from 1994-2004

In this section, I will first discuss continuity of popular narratives, and then I will touch on the narratives that began to fade or disappear in this decade. In the end, I will discuss how authorships, novelists' style change, and writing process contributed to the narratives' dynamics and are reflective of Ukrainians' national identity evolutionary process.

Some clear continuous meta-narratives and themes from the previous decade can be traced in the 2004–2014 data. They serve as both foundations for new meta-narratives and triggers for the changes during this period. Having Zabuzhko and Andrukhovych as the novel writers in both decades also contributed to the continuity and tracing of the narrative changes. Kostenko had been writing her novel for ten years before it was published in 2010, thus providing a useful overlap and transition between the decades.

Enthusiastic fatalism and *marginal ambivalence* were the most prominent meta-narratives from the popular discourse that overlap in both decades. Just like in the previous decade, there was a significant sense of pessimism in 2004–2014. Andrukhovych asks, "What is better in our lethargic situation: rocking, inflaming, fanning, or can it be the other way around?" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 15). This question was most likely in response to his own realization in *Moscoviad* that remained unrealized, "Cursing good-naturedly our unfortunate history, the friendship of the peoples and the 1922 union treaty, you realize that going back to sleep is ruled out." (Andrukhovych, 2000, p. 5). The idea of being 'asleep' or 'lethargic' corresponded to and stemmed from the narrative of the fatalism of the previous decade. Pashkovskyy, in *Daily Wander,* echoed the idea that "while you sleep, the sun flies over the horizon dozens of times with a brass bell, wakes you up from a lethargic slumber, several days pass" (Pashkovskyy, 1999, p. 6), calling his readers to understand the importance of the time fleeing and the need to take action. Kostenko was even more specific and pessimistic in her warnings about the danger of 'being asleep,'

> We are already with that Russia like those Egyptian twins with their heads joined together. Soon, there will be a unified energy system. And there, look, is the Single Economic Space. That is, there will be no more space.[43] One morning, we will wake up in another state. Because we slumbered ours away." (Kostenko, 2010, pp. 107-108).

However, at the same time, there was still a hint of hope or enthusiasm, just like in the previous decade. Andrukhovych felt hopeful when he said, "The most exciting thing about nightmares is when they end. You know about it, Kyiv" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 7), and once again, "Thanks to reality, which is actually fragments of dreams. Thank you for the life that begins again" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 50). Kostenko also noted proactive, albeit long overdue, changes: "It is difficult to belong to a nation whose national consciousness is awakening only now. Especially if you have been suffering from insomnia for a long time"

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[43] In this context, the word 'space' in Ukrainian means freedom.

(Kostenko, 2010, p. 372). Sleep is not only a state of not-seeing and being lethargic and slow

to act, but also at once a safe and dangerous place. Sleep can be a safe place to retreat to; it

can be comforting to turn off the outside world for a while. Alternatively, sleep could be

scary if one suspects they will have nightmares. In these novels, sleep was something safe for

Ukrainians, and waking up was both necessary and challenging because being awake

demanded action. The *enthusiastic fatalism* narrative in the new decade meant that the

fundamental task of nation-building under Kuchma was unfinished. This is supported by

previous research (Kuzio, 1998). It also meant that the seemingly unresolved issues of self-

identification and self-awareness would be brought up again in this decade's narratives.

 Marginal ambivalence, that is, social tolerance, was another meta-narrative from the

previous decade that also continued to reappear in this period. Just like in the past, this

mainly concerned the issues of ethnicity, language, divisive patriotism, gender, and attitudes

towards the LGBT community. Andrukhovych shared his feelings about various ethnic

groups:

> My inner fugitive began to calm down only in the metro, after six or seven
> stops, when the number of Russian words in the carriage noticeably decreased.
> 'Thank God, Chinese,' I breathed, looking lovingly at the new passengers. I
> was happy to hug not only them - thank God, Negroes,[44] I said, thank God,
> Mexicans, Hindus, Persians. Thank God that we have a whole Cosmos
> (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 15).

He was consistent in his fear of the Empire (both Soviet and Russian), its cultural

colonization, and his celebration of ethnic diversity. Kostenko echoed these sentiments: "I

don't like specifics, including national ones." (Kostenko, 2010, p. 66).

 Similarly to the ambivalence about someone else's ethnicity, linguistic differences did

not matter in this decade. In all movies and TV shows, people speak Russian and Ukrainian

interchangeably, and no one was offended or upset with the interlocutor speaking the other

language. Andrukhovych (2006, p. 4) talked about half-Kyivans and half-Lvivians as citizens

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[44] In the Ukrainian language this word does not have a negative connotation. It simply means black.

living in Kyiv, suggesting a mixed domestic identity incorporating "nationalistic" Lviv and cosmopolitan, predominantly Russian-speaking Kyiv. Developing his thoughts further, he hoped "that [Kyiv's] marginality can actually be much more influential than the Russian-speaking masses or patriotic officialism" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 15). And taking another step further from nationalism, he concluded that "[b]y and large, patriotism is immoral. Its place is only in the stadium - where it is unambiguous, by the colors of the jerseys and underpants, that ours and theirs can be seen, and ours must win because they are better. After all, they are ours" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 26). Kostenko adopted feminist attitudes, such as women being breadwinners, while "us, supposedly, two men, sat silently behind them" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 306). She also spoke out on LGBT acceptance when she says that she was "tolerant of everyone, traditional and non-traditional, let them love each other as they want" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 115). Just like in the previous decade, all movies and TV shows depicted cohabitation as within societal structures that did not require legal marriage or registration. There was no emphasis on "traditional family values" or "duhovnost'",[45] a notion often used in Russia's political discourse when it comes to defining societal values (Rousselet, 2020). Continuity of this narrative can be interpreted as positive ongoing trends of societal inclusivity, civility, and a more unified society. This means that the new meta-narratives will be infused with the notions of inclusion and avoidance of traditionally assumed binary divide and will help reinterpret the way researchers look at Ukraine.

The inferiority complex, as an overarching mentality, was less visible across the data in this decade. It was only present significantly in *Notes* and, to a lesser extent, in *Sweet Darusia*, *Raven's Way*, and *The Remote Space.* Kostenko was sure that "Ukrainians entered the Third Millennium with the same cartload of problems, the inferiority complex"

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[45] The closest translation would be spirituality, often used in Russia to distinguish between traditional, orthodox 'us' and 'them', the decaying West.

(Kostenko, 2010, p. 116). Later, she wondered, "Is there any other country measured in the number of humiliations per capita?" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 177). In his dystopian novel, Melnyk (2013) described a class-divided society, which differentiated between the oppressor and the oppressed within one society. This, to a certain degree, suggests that ordinary people felt like they were still being marginalized and looked down on by stronger Others, but mainly it speaks to the domestic divide between the people and elites.

Disoriented irreversibility and *audacious fearfulness* were absent from the material analyzed for this decade and had been substituted with new meta-narratives. These changes indicate positive societal changes, such as attempts to leave the victim mentality behind and move past the post-colonial heritage towards constructing Ukrainians' own destiny. The European vector was obvious; thus, there was no disorientation, and as the Soviet Empire had been declared dead, there was no need to talk about the irreversibility of the past as much. This interpretation goes against the dominant academic discourse of Ukrainians balancing between Russia and the West or changing their mind and switching sides. *Audacious fearfulness* was replaced by new narratives of decisive and dedicated actions of the people, ensuring that their voice was heard, and their choice was respected.

Two writers in both decades, Zabuzhko and Andrukhovych, contributed to the narratives' continuity by showing how their style, content, and meta-narratives have changed and evolved. Both authors wrote in a postmodern "stream of consciousness" style in the early years of Ukraine regaining independence. In their later work, they switched to essays on issues of the past and future that mattered not only to them or intellectual elites but also to ordinary people. Zabuzhko's *Notre Dame d'Ukraine* is a research-based monograph with 940 footnotes. Instead of often hard-to-understand run-on sentences of *The Moscoviad*, Andrukhovych now talked clearly about geopolitics and compared different models for the Central European Union with bullet-pointed lists and logical arguments. This rapid change in

style and content suggests that talking about the traumatic experiences in the previous decade helped clear the mind, and now was the time to make conscious, knowledge-based decisions. The fact that these novels were voted the most popular of the year and widely accepted by the public illustrates the people's growth and appetite for solid food for thought. The intellectual nature of most other novels of this decade supports this claim.

Kostenko's timeframe overlap connected the time when Yanukovych became president, and the situation in Ukraine started to deteriorate again with Kuchma's second term and events leading up to the Orange Revolution. This overlap made it a perfect transitioning data source from the Kuchma decade into the one this chapter focuses on. *Notes* bridged the two revolutions of 2004 and 2014 by showing the growing disparity between the ordinary people and the elites, the urgent need for action, and the public's readiness to protect their values and aspirations, which will be reflected in the narratives discussed below. The messages in this key piece of writing encapsulated and perhaps even supported the motivations of Ukrainians for going out on the streets again in 2013–2014.

In the previous decade, Ukrainian writers used a postmodern writing style, such as "stream of consciousness", to process national trauma and explore Ukraine's re-emerging identity. However, as national consciousness matured, their work changed to more structured, research-based, and accessible forms, such as essays and logical arguments. This change illustrates a broader societal movement from existential questioning to pragmatic engagement with contemporary issues. Similarly, the transition from introspective, trauma-heavy narratives to clear, knowledge-based discussions of geopolitics and governance signifies Ukraine's national identity moving toward a more conscious and proactive phase of its development. The popularity of these works suggests that the general public's intellectual engagement has also deepened, demonstrating a demand for serious discourse rather than purely emotive or abstract storytelling. The very fact of the style and content changes speaks

to the idea of national identity being a dynamic, evolutionary process rather than static binary conceptualizations. The trajectory of these novels suggests that Ukraine's national identity is not static but evolves in response to political and social realities. The shift from fragmented, introspective narratives to structured, politically engaged discourse mirrored Ukraine's own transition from post-Soviet uncertainty to a more assertive, unified, self-aware national identity.

Meta-narratives Overview

In the following section, I focus on four main popular meta-narratives reconstructed from the data. One common theme among these narratives is 'tension': tension between the people and elites, tension within the society, tension between reality and imposition, and tension between Ukraine and its ontological Others, namely Russia and Europe. However, as the data will show, this tension does not appear along the Dnieper River or divide Ukrainians into Russian- and Ukrainian-speakers. Counter-intuitively, these tensions can be seen across the nation, unifying people of all kinds of backgrounds within different ethnic and religious groups and places of residence.

These narratives are *people vs. elites, svidomi vs. not, reality vs. imposition*, and *Ukraine ant its Others*. The names for the first and the last narratives are quite self-explanatory; the other two need some explanation. *Svidomi*, from Ukrainian *свідомі*, can be roughly translated as "aware," "conscious," "awake," or "woke." Given the complexity of the meaning behind this word in Ukrainian, which I will discuss later in this Chapter, and the frequency with which it has been used in novels and movies, I chose to transliterate it rather than use an English equivalent. By imposition I mean that the elite imposed, stirred up culture wars by instrumentalizing ethnic and linguistic diversity of Ukraine and emotionalizing

controversial historical memories and heroes. While for ordinary Ukrainians these issues were not meaningful or prioritized, the elite made them so by imposing a different reality that included sensitive and emotive issues by politicizing them.

These narratives were interrelated and interconnected with each other. For instance, the tension between the people and elites was noticeable across the board regardless of whether Ukrainians were *svidomi* or not and irrespective of the region, as people had been growing weary of the government and Yushchenko as the President, who only got 5.45% of the popular vote and came fifth in the first round of election in 2010. This dissatisfaction with the elites was happening in the background of the tensions between those who were *svidomi* and those who were not, as there was an understanding of the need to take action for change. While some people, again irrespective of their linguistic, religious, regional, or other context, were more ready to stand up against the government, others were more passive and indifferent to the country's fate. However, as will be shown later in the chapter, even the most apathetic people have shown the ability and tendency to "wake up" and become more *svidomi*. This has been empirically exemplified during the Revolution of Dignity of 2014, which included a wide cross-section of Ukrainian society. This was also fueled by tension between reinterpreting and rediscovering history, which began under Yushchenko from 2004 to 2010, and the blunt culture wars that Yanukovych's government utilized to secure regional votes and justify his authoritarian power. As the milieu for all this, Ukraine's relations with Europe and Russia, as well as both real and perceived attitudes to and from them, played their part in how Ukrainians saw themselves in the world. The narratives of *Ukraine and its Others* and, partially, *svidomi vs. not* were built on the narratives from the previous decade. In contrast, the narratives of *reality vs. imposition* and, partly, *people vs. elite* are unique to this decade.

Each of the following subsections will briefly recount the main ideas behind each narrative based on the data collected from the novels, describe the political and societal everyday context that fits this narrative reconstructed from the data found in newspapers and movies, and provide some speculations on how this narrative might have informed the foreign policy of the time.

Narrative 1: *People vs. elites*

> Everywhere throughout Ukraine - on poles, walls, banners - the black silhouette of Gongadze's head. Yes, as if the devil cut out its shadow with scissors. It's just that the prosecutor's office does not know where the head is. The devil knows. The soul refuses to believe that the President ordered this murder. However, whether the President ordered it or not, but his people could. And this division of society into "us" and "them" is fatal. It worked like a detonator. And everything accumulated over the years exploded and blew the roof off. Kyiv is screaming—there are rallies on the Maidan. People shout, protest, and demand the truth. Appeals and appeals are everywhere – it is an all-Ukrainian protest. We entrusted our country to someone else to build. That is why they are building someone else's, not ours, anti-Ukrainian Ukraine.
> *Excerpt from 'Notes of a Ukrainian Madman' by Lina Kostenko (2010, p. 14)*

Gongadze's case was the final nail in the coffin of Kuchma's regime. People who trusted him to rebuild Ukraine could no longer see the President and his team and administration as something they wanted to be a part of. The divide between the people and government had never been bigger and sharper. Despite Kuchma's rhetoric of no return to the old Soviet structures and practices, the reality was the opposite. The Orange Revolution was the people's response to a domestic situation where corruption and an authoritarian regime had taken over.

The narrative of *people vs. elites* was the most prominent narrative that stemmed from the end of Kuchma's second term and is traced during the 2004–2014 decade. It appeared in all novels and most movies from this time, and the ever-growing tension between the people

and the government was present in all of Ukraine, not only in its Western, traditionally assumed "nationalistic" regions.

This unifying perception of *people vs. elites* was most evident from *Travels With Mamayota: In Search of Ukraine* by Artem Chapeye. He spent almost two months behind the wheel of a motorcycle, traveling through Ukraine from Kolomyia to Luhansk and back. Artem asked the people he met two questions: *"What do you dream about?"* and *"What does Ukraine mean to you?"* The mere fact that he asked Ukrainians these two questions shows the utmost importance of people reflecting on who they were, where they wanted to belong, and what kind of life they wanted to live. The book contained answers from ordinary citizens whom Chapeye met on the long road through Galicia, Bukovyna, Podillia, Cherkasy, Kyiv, Polissia, Severshchyna, Poltava, Slobozhanshchyna, Donbas, Zaporizhzhya, Crimea and Odeshchyna. Regardless of their place of origin, occupation, language, ethnic or educational background, from villagers in the West to truckers in the East, all framed their extreme dissatisfaction with the government as "us versus them." The intense feeling of the ordinary people's alienation from the elites was conveyed through the language that categorizes the elites as the "Other" who were exploiting the nation and "brought Ukraine to a halt" (Chapeye, 2011, p. 221). Throughout Artem's journey and the book, Ukrainians did not even refer to the government as such. People used the separating pronoun "they" because everyone knew who "they" were. People were similarly frustrated with both Yushchenko and Yanukovych and did not distinguish between the opponents' platforms and ideologies[46] because under both Presidents, corruption was not dealt with, and people complained that "'[t]hey' looted Ukraine, there are no jobs here, young people are emigrating. We had a sugar factory, so 'they' closed it" (Chapeye, 2011, p. 103).

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[46] Yanukovych kept promising that the pro-EU policy will not change even as late as November 2013 (Issue 2, KP, 28.11.2013).

Kostenko reflected on this and accused the elites that "[t]here is something zoological in the attitude of this government towards people. [T]he entire society is the injured party. It seems that we, as a nation, are already trying on a shoe for a dead foot. Where will this nation go next?" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 238). If, in the previous decade, the people and the elites seemed to be in relative harmony, there was a clear escalating divide between them now. People grew disillusioned with the political establishment in Ukraine regardless of its party colors and agendas. People lost faith in the elites and their capacity to deliver any progress for people's well-being. This feeling of "us versus them" was one of the key uniting factors within the Ukrainian public discourse during the decade, and it bridged over superficial differences such as the language people speak, their ethnicity, or their place of residence.

Apart from the understandable dissatisfaction with corruption and lack of transparency, which have been emphasized in the existing literature and which elites have been blamed for (Kuzio, 2015), the people of Ukraine were also extremely unhappy with many other things that were not acknowledged in the wider academic literature on Ukrainian national identity before. Among them were the inertia of the elites inherited from the Soviet times, slow and inconsistent nation-building,[47] disrespect for human rights, lack of democratization, and lack of a strong leader who could unite the nation and who would get the job done not for the sake of their political gains. These themes were less prominent, or absent, in the previous decade when both the people and elites felt disoriented and lost about the present. My interpretation of this change is that Ukrainians had gotten more clarity about the current situation they found themselves in and how different they were from the elites. Also, it is important to note that what previous research overemphasized—the divide in

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[47] Kuzio touches on this in his book *Ukraine: State and Nation Building*. However, he focuses on nation-building as opposed to state-building. He does not engage with how this structural difference and the slow pace of nation-building impacted societal moods and swings among ordinary Ukrainians and how that consequentially affects domestic and foreign policies. He analyzes and demonstrates the elites' failure to deliver their promises and build a strong Ukrainian nation-state.

Ukraine—is what we do not see in this decade's societal relations. That is the linguistic, religious, or ethnic divide, or, to be more precise, the meaningful importance of that divide. The biggest and most significant divide in 2004–2014 in Ukraine was not between the West and East of Ukraine but rather between the people of Ukraine, regardless of their background or geography, and the elites, regardless of their parties.

The thirst for democratization was one of the principal sub-themes of this narrative and the driving force that led people on the streets to protest in 2004 and again in 2014. Andrukhovych reflected on the post-Orange Revolution of 2004 and noted people's *growing awareness* to respond to autocratic processes and fight for Ukraine's democracy. He said that "[u]ndoubtedly, even last year, had I known what and how to respond to this, I would have been fiercer in defense of […] the values of the young democracy, which have been subjected to such audacious doubt in this strange part of the world, and in particular in my country, which I would categorically ask not to be confused with, let's say, Belarus" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 14). The Orange Revolution was a significant event that united people nationwide with massive protests against falsifying the 2004 presidential elections, and in support of the openly pro-European and pro-NATO Viktor Yushchenko. It was people-originated and people-led, with Yushchenko and his team joining the crowds in Maidan later. Andrukhovych acknowledged that many probably did not know what they were doing and how to defend young Ukrainian democracy better. Still, he emphasized a meaningful difference between Ukraine and, as in his quote, Belarus. Ukrainian society was fed up with undemocratic changes, and when the tension between the people and the elites reached its peak, the people went out on the streets to make it stop (The Guardian, 2004).

Zabuzhko also blamed the elites for moving Ukraine away from democracy. In her words, "*They*[48] galvanized the immanent internal tendency in Ukrainian social processes by importing Russian scenarios: in its historical-anthropological sense, it was the next, higher phase of that "new religious war" — the attack of barbarocracy[49] on democracy" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 14). She implied that near the end of Kuchma's second term, the elites took on Soviet and Russian political traditions such as media control, trying to forge elections, and removal of opposition, which were unacceptable for Ukrainians. Kostenko asked rhetorically, "Do I have to endure this quasi-democracy destroying me as badly as that pseudo-socialism?!" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 24). The clear answer for her was no. She did not have to endure this order. A few thoughts later, she made an explicit connection to the issues of national identity and expressed her dissatisfaction with how the world perceives Ukraine because of its politicians, "Nationality is not indicated in the passport,[50] so now any bad thing is called Ukrainian—'Ukrainian mafia,' 'Ukrainian corruption,' 'Ukrainian prostitution'" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 24). Kostenko contraposed the Ukrainian people against the political elites by calling the elites "[f]raudsters, thieves, anti-Semites, bribe-takers, hypocrites and fraudsters, statemugs[51] and politicasters, bureaucrats and nouveau riches, the musty legacy of the empire, the ceiling of narrow ideologies" and lamented about the effect it has had on ordinary Ukrainians: "everything is attributed to these people, who no longer know what is happening to them and what Bermuda [triangle] they have fallen into" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 24). Later, she once again rhetorically questioned the elite way of doing democracy presented to Ukrainians: "[b]ut why, where did it all come from? What floodgates broke through? Why

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[48] Italics mine to emphasize the linguistic "us versus them divide" which is commonly employed by all the authors in all novels, as well as in movies.

[49] Zabuzhko coined this word by combining "barbarian" and the suffix "-ocracy" to indicate a difference between what regime people wanted and what the elites offered.

[50] During the USSR, ethnicity was required to be indicated in passports and other forms of identification. After regaining its independence, Ukraine has removed this requirement in order to eliminate discrimination based on ethnicity.

[51] Kostenko coined this derogative word that caricatures Ukrainian elites as opposed to being good statesmen.

is there a thick spirit of plebeianism in society? Why did swindlers and ignoramuses get to power? Why is everything bought and sold? Why is slander dominating at the state level? Why is all this called democracy, people's rule?!" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 292). Kostenko depicted this divide between the common people and the elites and their different understandings of what democracy was. Whatever it was, it was not what Ukraine's elites were doing, and people had had enough.

The Orange Revolution of 2004 was the result of such unbearable tension. Zabuzhko perfectly summed up the outcome of this significant event, saying that "the uniqueness of the Orange Revolution can be seen first of all in the fact that it contains a nation, perhaps for the first time in recent history in such a pure form, rebelled precisely against the 'power of the masses',[52] demanding the law as a general moral norm. This is the first serious 'failure point' of our century-old 'barbarian matrix' — the rebellion of democracy against barbarocracy" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 635). The elites got pushback from the people domestically, which could not have left the international orientation unchanged.

My analysis suggests that this tension between elites and the people has significant implications for Ukraine's foreign policy. Based on the meta-narrative I identified, the Ukrainian people during 2004 and 2014 were likely to prefer a foreign policy that brought Ukraine closer to a democratic community of states, adhered to human rights protection and development, provided established mechanisms for scrutiny and accountability over the government, and ensured progressive changes in the inert political and government structures. Considering the strong sense of antagonism towards the inherited structures from the USSR, repeated negative sentiments about Russia and the idea of it as an aggressive Empire, the Western vector seemed to be the choice that the people of Ukraine would make, even if this choice was a lesser evil for some citizens. This interpretation is supported by

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[52] This is a sarcastic reference to the Soviet notion and slogan that power belongs to "the masses".

relevant findings of public opinion polls conducted at the time. According to a Razumkov survey from 2013, the greatest benefits of the EU included a high level of social protection (47%), the rule of law (32%), and a well-developed democracy (27%). Other notable advantages were access to financial resources (22%), high-quality healthcare (19%), scientific and technological progress (17%), and a low level of corruption (14%) (Razumkov Center, 2013, p. 104). The main shortcomings of the Customs Union (CU), according to citizens, were corruption (48%), shadow economy (33%), dominance of Russia (29%), and lack of democracy (27%) (Razumkov Center, 2013, p. 105).

Narrative 2: *Svidomi vs. not*

> At the same time, the very awareness of being positioned (and therefore being) between the East and West is fundamental to Central and Eastern European self-awareness. Understanding that you are in-between is something like an identification mark. Neither the Czech Republic nor, let's say, Poland are formally in-between countries anymore. They have been invited to become part of the West and are increasingly becoming part of it. So, it happened: Central-Eastern Europe has moved from its place and is drifting in the eastern direction through the territory of Ukraine. At the same time, it cannot help but run into opposition from the East, and if it would be a bit presumptuous to call it a war, then a tough confrontation is more appropriate. In the fall of 2004, the Central European Union took on the orange color, captured millions of new individual consciousnesses, sped up the Dnipro River, and spread all the way to the Russian border in the northeast. In this direction, it has actually exhausted the potential of expansion and shifting – further is only Russia, which is another continent on the whole.
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> *Excerpt from 'The Devil Hides in Cheese' by Yurii Andrukhovych (2006, p. 46)*

If, in the previous decade, Ukrainians had been confused en masse about who they were after regaining independence and experiencing a united identity crisis, the Orange Revolution of 2004 reset the quest for national identity and spotlighted a new growing faction within Ukrainian society. If, in the past decade, Ukrainian identity was based more on negating the Soviet and Russian "heritage," now, in addition to this, there was a new quality of being "*svidomi*" in play. Being *svidomi* as opposed to not represented a newly apparent

tension in Ukrainian society's public discourse. This narrative of *svidomi vs. not* sprang up most prominently during the Orange Revolution of 2004, was traced throughout the whole decade, and kindled the events of the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014.

As the word "*svidomi*" was used relatively often throughout the novels and other sources during this decade, it is important to look more closely at the meaning and semantics of this concept in the Ukrainian language before exemplifying it with empirical evidence. What does it mean to be *svidomi*? This adjective has a range of loosely connected meanings. The literal translation would be conscious or aware. It can describe someone with consciousness or conscience, who is conscious or intelligent, and correctly understands and evaluates the surrounding reality. It can also be attributed to inanimate things and phenomena to describe something that is based on a system of particular views; something that is caused, done, or used with a special intention or specific purpose; something that is connected with the development of consciousness or mind; or something familiar or known. To be *svidomi* is to be awake, present, and in control, to realize something new or have an epiphany of something fundamental and transformative. In the context of identity, it can mean to simply be. Not just to be self-aware or self-conscious but rather to discover who you are, to internalize this personal truth about yourself, to be brave to celebrate who you are, and to be free to live out this truth. Once this epiphany has settled in, it becomes easier to identify those different from oneself, which may lead to a certain degree of tension between Self and Other.

The *svidomi vs. not* narrative was the second most prominent narrative that could be traced throughout all novels, most movies, and journal articles. It was loosely connected with the first narrative of *people vs. elites* discussed above. Being not *svidomi* was equated with the idea of being just like "them" or a part of "them", enabling "them" to do wrong and not pursue the national interests. Kostenko linked these two narratives by saying,

> "Ukraine is ruled by people who do not love it and to whom it is foreign. What is it? Plebeianism, a black hole of consciousness? Is it our inability to build our own state?

Exhaustion of the nation to the point of complete loss of vitality? Or, maybe it's just a terrible revenge of the Empire - you wanted your own state, you got it. Here's your culture, here's your freedom. This is a Trojan horse, from which all those partorgs and komsorgs, members of district and regional committees, and directors of the military-industrial complex will pop out. They will lead your state, and they will destroy it" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 130).

She grieved over the shortage of people being *svidomi* in Ukrainian society and identified others not *svidomi* as "plebeians" who lacked self-identification, cultural awareness, and consciousness as citizens of a free state. Here, we could also see the continuity of fear of the Empire and disgust of the old non-democratic power structures. Later, Kostenko continued to accuse "them" of destroying Ukraine by plebeianizing Ukrainian citizens:

They have already done it with Ukraine, with culture, with everything. But why? Where did it all come from? What floodgates broke through? Why is there a thick spirit of plebeianism in society? Why did swindlers and ignoramuses get to power? Why is everything bought and sold? Why is slander dominating at the state level? Why is all this called democracy, people's rule?! (Kostenko, 2010, p. 292).

Zabuzhko echoed Kostenko's thoughts on the state of affairs in Ukrainian society, focusing on how not-*svidomi* citizens enabled the elites by being blind to the lies, and accepting the farce "they" presented as a Ukrainian democracy. She argued that

the most dramatic changes in our 'general culture' for the national project [are] caused by this progressive 'plebeization' process. Perhaps the most important change — is that the myth of a state appeared in Ukrainian culture (NB: it is a myth, not a political concept!), which it never had before — and thanks to which, to a large extent, it was able to fall into that trap called 'the enslaved consciousness (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 625).

By dividing Ukrainians into *svidomi* and "plebeians," Kostenko and Zabuzhko were unambiguously explicit and direct in their language, which highlighted the plea for the latter to wake up and realize that the elites were not on the side of the people and the people should unite and bring changes in the power structures. Even though they may come across as harsh, presumptuous, or pretentious on the first read, it is worth noting that they did not divide Ukrainians into these two opposing groups by any external parameter, such as language, religion, geography, or education. The *svidomi* divide, as real as it was, did not go alongside the Dnipro River, and it dealt more with values, preferred norms, and standards of living rather than what had been commonly assumed about Ukrainian identity. The narrative of

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people vs. elites who also knew no linguistical or ethnical attributes encompassed this

narrative of *svidomi vs. not* and included Ukrainians of various regions and backgrounds, as

evident throughout *Travels With Mamayota: In Search of Ukraine* by Artem Chapeye.

The dystopian novel, *The Remote Space* by Yaroslav Melnyk, was set in a universe

where ordinary people were made blind from birth by the government to have complete

control over the "plebeians." The ability to see was deemed dangerous, subversive, and

antisocial as "hallucination enters a stage that threatens society. The consequence of the

patient's dangerous activity can be the spreading of doubts about the integrity of normal

citizens" (Melnyk, 2013, p. 12). This echoed the ideas of being *svidomi*, that is being

conscious, aware, and seeing reality for oneself, and being not *svidomi*, who fall prey to the

elites' narratives. Like everybody else, the protagonist underwent the "plebeization" as a

child; he suddenly got his vision back, and became *svidomi*. The government-appointed

doctors tried to blind him again and comfort him by saying,

> We must put order not only in your senses but also in your thoughts, in your
> consciousness. And, believe me, it is not necessary for us, but for you, so that
> you can return to your girlfriend, to your former happiness. Return and live,
> not suffer. We treat you with compassion, only with compassion, as a sick
> person (Melnyk, 2013, p. 30).

In this upside-down universe, being not-*svidomi* was equal to being happy, and being *svidomi*

was seen as sick and needing state-prescribed treatment. The protagonist escaped the hospital

and ran away from his blinded community to find shelter on the city's outskirts where a few

seeing people lived. He was encouraged by an old man, "You can see, but they don't. You are

a god, do you understand? And they are all sheep. And do not dare to consider yourself

inferior! Ages ago, the whole world was blinded so that people would turn into sheep and be

controlled. You're the only one with sight, remember that. They are all powerless against

those who can see. That's why they hate us so much" (Melnyk, 2013, pp. 91–92).

The feeling of being inferior because one was *svidomi* aligns with Kostenko's

thoughts that "[Ukrainian] society will not awake. And if someone complained or raised a

voice of protest, they would look at him as if he were crazy. Society is no longer interested in any form of protest. The old want bigger pensions. The young want to have a great time. And people like me, idiots, always reflect on something" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 194). Andrukhovych resonated with Kostenko when he reflected on the "*svidomi vs. not*" divide and rhetorically asked, "In this struggle with memory, it is essential to bring some order. Well, really, what reason do they have for nostalgia? These already aged and mostly disoriented people? What, besides youth, makes them look back with regret and sorrow? Where exactly does their memory go wrong, building strange fantasies about a lost paradise? (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 7). This inability to let go of the past, delusional memories, lack of self-reflection and self-identification, and passivity to change the current system sharply distinguished *svidomi* from those who were not.

The government in Melnyk's novel was at fault for making people blind, and they were confident in their firm grasp of power. They laughed at the not-*svidomi* and did not believe that the people would succeed in changing the government as they said that

> a person can have any serious intentions, but everything is decided by knowledge of reality, completeness of information. We are dealing with blind people who think and plan their actions within the limits of their understanding. They are victims of their narrow consciousness. But in this case, they can try again... And again, they will be left with nothing. Even a hundred times (Melnyk, 2013, p. 137).

But as Zabuzhko in her introduction to *Notre Dame d'Ukraine* noted, "in society, the thirst for self-knowledge and belief in rapid evolutionary progress stirred up by Maidan 2004 has not yet cooled down" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 9): it gave hope to *svidomi* Ukrainians that others would find answers to the question "Who am I?" and would be able to become *svidomi* too, and then they could change Ukraine together. When, in late 2013, then-President Yanukovych suddenly pulled out of the EU Association Agreement, he underestimated the numbers, unity, and power of *svidomi* Ukrainians. In 2010, Kostenko reflected on the events of the Orange Revolution of 2004 and, in a way, predicted the future events when she celebrated the awakening of Ukrainians and the united power of the *svidomi*: "People stand

on the Maidan. On all Maidans of Ukraine. This is already a united all-in-one Maidan"
(Kostenko, 2010, p. 403). For Kostenko and others, "awakening" and the *svidomi* divide was
not the geographical, linguistic, or educational background—it was across the board
regardless of these attributes. The thirst for self-knowledge or, better said, self-identification
fermented through the 2004–2014 decade and resulted in the Euromaidan Revolution. The
biggest difference between *svidomi* and not was that the former were prompted to action
while the latter were still passive and in inertia from the previous decade.

It follows logically that the *svidomi* preference for foreign policy would be European
integration because the peaceful protests broke out right after the Yanukovych government
withdrew from the EU Agreement. That was not what he had promised in his presidential
campaign program, and the decision to withdraw came out of the blue. As for the not *svidomi*
Ukrainians, I argue that their "blindness" and passivity would not significantly impact
Ukraine's international politics as they got used to taking whatever came their way and
accepting whatever the government decided to do.

Narrative 3: *Reality vs. imposition*

> It is not just a political confrontation brewing in the society but a confrontation
> of civilizations. And for some reason, the conflict along the East-West line
> became sharply defined. So, as if the authorities kept this divide in a reserved
> stockpile until a particular time, "X," when they will need to throw one part of
> society against another. The East is depicted as red and pro-Soviet, and the
> West as nationalist and anti-Russian. The bet is made on the ravine of human
> consciousness. This is yet another political Halloween. They want to break
> Ukraine over the knee. They want to pour oil into the fire and let the genie of
> chauvinism out of the vodka bottle. Political technologists are rubbing their
> hands: everything worked out as planned.
> *Excerpt from 'Notes of a Ukrainian Madman' by Lina Kostenko (2010, p. 378)*

The narrative of tension between people's lived *reality and imposition* stemmed from
the two narratives discussed above. The government engaged in culture wars and forced this
division onto society in response to the narrative of *people vs. elites* to deflect opposition
from the people. Also, pitting people against each other based on external attributes was

intended to minimize the influence of *svidomi* Ukrainians, as they constituted a threat to the government. This contributed to the reasons why ideas about Ukraine as divided along ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines were so prominent, even though my data suggests those divisions were not meaningful. Not-*svidomi* Ukrainians were an easy target and tool to implement this narrative as the Yanukovych government tried to ensure its continuity in office. This was the only narrative I identified that was not internalized and accepted by Ukrainians but was exposed and rejected as an alien narrative that the government tried to impose on people. Kostenko noted how the elites and government media tried to influence the consciousness, or being *svidomi*, when she said, "Newspapers bombarded consciousness. A new form of freedom of speech—they say whatever they want to say. A point of view is imposed that distorts the essence" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 29). This narrative had several sub-themes that I will discuss further. These sub-themes concerned domestic binary, language issues, memory, myth, and identification.

Andrukhovych was the most critical writer from this decade about the notion of a domestic binary in Ukraine. His reflections on the West-East divide were nuanced and honest. He did acknowledge the existing regional differences alongside the Dnipro River, both material and non-material. He noted,

> The blue line of the Dnipro almost perfectly divides the globe of Ukraine into two hemispheres - the eastern and the western. This purely cartographic image is most directly related to what is commonly called the complex of two Ukraines. If rivers are borders, then the Dnipro is *primarily a border of landscapes:*[53] hills, forests, and so-called mountains in the west, that is, on the Right Bank, and a plain steppe in the east (the Left Bank). At the same time, everything west of the Dnipro *appears*[54] to be culturally primordial, settled, agricultural, and stable. Everything further east *appears*[55] to be rootless-nomadic, colonized, proletarian, and devastated. This, strictly speaking, is the former Wild Field – the terrain of never-ending movements and resettlement of hundreds of nomadic peoples, all possible Sarmatians girded by Iranian-Ossetian swords (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 51).

[53] Italics mine
[54] Italics mine
[55] Italics mine

These observations *seem* to support the overemphasized findings and arguments from the

previous research on Ukraine, which is a very simplistic view of Ukraine being sharply

divided into Western and Eastern or Southeastern halves with subsequent implications for

foreign policy preferences. However, for Andrukhovych, the Dnipro divide was primarily

about landscape and nature. When it came to ideational differences, he said that these

differences were not inherent but rather presumed. They *appear* to be seen as real or true but

are not necessarily so. Here, he addressed not only the stereotypical view of Ukraine's binary

divide but also pointed out the colonial heritage of the Left Bank.[56] Similarly, in the

introductory quote for this subsection, Kostenko pointed out that the West-East divide was

being depicted as if these differences between Ukrainians were being imposed and reinforced

from outside of society to create an illusion of a divided Ukraine with the "divide and

conquer" strategy in mind (Kostenko, 2010, p. 378).

Further, Andrukhovych concluded that "manifestations of this bifurcation, including

conflictual ones, constitute the meaning of the Ukrainian historical challenge and of the

Ukrainian uncertainty" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 64). This post-colonial insight into the whys

behind the regional bifurcation was missing from this decade's academic literature on

Ukraine. Previous research focused on the things that appeared to be, such as the language

people spoke or their self-prescribed ethnicity, rather than on the reasons behind people in the

East of Ukraine speaking Russian and self-identifying as of Russian background. Despite

simplistic implications for foreign policy, Andrukhovych presented a very counterintuitive

interpretation of the Ukrainian challenge and uncertainty:

> By and large, the Left Bank does not allow Ukraine to return to the European side
> finally, and the Right Bank - to the Russian side. At the same time, both antipodes
> have grown so closely together in everyday life that there is no question of a mutually
> expected divorce with transforming the Dnipro into another border - a state one. We
> continue to tolerate each other and gradually grow in all deeper dimensions. There is

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[56] That is, the East of Ukraine.

> no doubt in my mind that such growth is actually taking place. But the way it happens
> causes [me] frequent despair (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 75).

Andrukhovych perfectly summarized the state of domestic affairs in Ukraine. Yes, there were differences, yet they were not irreconcilable or decisive. On the contrary, he saw tendencies of unification and mutuality. Kostenko similarly acknowledged the divide and signs of unification when she said, "We are losing our real state. We are already like that cargo ship that recently broke up in the Black Sea. One part is carried toward Europe, and the other drifts towards Russia. And the survived sailors are making borscht together on the stern." (Kostenko, 2010, p. 325). Andrukhovych raised concern about how differences were being overcome and tolerated. By this, he most likely meant forced Ukrainianization under Yushchenko and predicted how Yanukovych would instrumentalize this to divide Ukrainian society further. At the end of his reflections on the binary divide, Andrukhovych concluded that "[i]n fact, there are much more than two Ukraines (let's agree that there are at least two hundred and twenty-two), and it is not exactly known where the Ukrainian dividing lines are today, that is, it is only known that they are everywhere, but to the least extent at the regional level" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 94). He rejected the idea that the regional divide as meaningful and advocated for celebrating diversity and pluralism in Ukrainian society.

The language issue has been one of the main foci in previous research on Ukrainian national identity and foreign policy (Kuzio 1998; Proedrou, 2010; Delwaide, 2011; Riabchuk, 2012; Korostelina, 2013; Wilson, 2014; Dostál and Jelen, 2015; Rozenberg, 2015). Numerous studies have correlated the regional distribution of either Ukrainian or Russian speakers with their foreign policy preferences (Riabchuk, 2002; Connolly, 2010; Whitmore, 2014; Shyrokykh, 2018). In contrast to 1994-2004, it was only now that the language issues came into play and gained public attention as "the government is breaking Ukraine to pieces: to the East and the West, to Russian and non-Russian speakers, to white-and-blue[57] and 'orange

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[57] This refers to Yanukovych, his party, and his government.

chaos'.[58] That's what they had in reserve—a strategy of division. They force it and deepen it. Manipulate and intimidate by it" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 396). Kostenko criticized the elite for instrumentalizing the language issue to the degree of societal tension. She saw this division as artificially brought in from outside society and as a means of "culture wars" for electoral purposes. This division did not occupy the minds of Ukrainians until the elites decided to use language as a political tool. Chapeye talked to Ukrainians from all over the country, switching between the Russian and Ukrainian language in the Southeast and Ukrainian and Romanian in the West, or having conversations bilingually without any hint of annoyance or feeling alienated or othered. In all the movies from this decade, there were multiple scenes where people use both languages (even in the Crimea-set *Queen of the Gas Station 2*) without any signs of being bothered that their interlocutor spoke the other language. The TV series from this decade portrayed bilingual families who got along well, and not once did the language become an issue for ordinary people. The identification by the language spoken was the focus of multiple quantitative studies done on Ukraine. This provided just mere statistical data and showed trends in Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians' numerical growth (Kotovska, 2017; Pomerantsev, 2020). While previous research has identified patterns between the languages Ukrainians spoke and their subjective self-identification, it has largely overlooked how Ukrainians felt about the language spoken by their interlocutors—thereby neglecting the intersubjective dimension. My interpretation of the data, however, suggest that this aspect was largely insignificant to them. From the data collected from the books, movies, and TV shows, the answer was clear—people did not care, as identification of the Other by language was rendered inconsequential. This aligns with the civic construction of the Ukrainian identity rather than lingua- and ethnical identities. Kostenko illustrated that for most Ukrainians, civic duty was more important than the language they spoke:

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[58] This refers to Yushchenko and his party.

> My father already spoke the language of the scalpel. The most important thing for him was to accurately diagnose, operate, and eliminate the disease. He obviously inherited this attitude. He deals with problems harshly and without sentiments, and in what language is not essential for him. Maybe in Ukrainian, maybe in Russian. And maybe in English (Kostenko, 2010, p. 116).

That said, the language issue was not a real issue until Russia's claims on Russian speakers outside of Russia. Ukrainian elites politicized language, but this was not successful with the electorate. But once Russia started interfering and politicizing this issue it became meaningful. A felt pro-Ukrainian language push among Ukrainians occurred when Russia started its narrative about *Russkiy mir*—the Russian-speaking world—in mid-2000s.

> The borders of the Russian world pass along the borders of the use of the Russian language,' said the first lady of Russia. So, the border of the Russian world passes through the kitchen of our president, along the corridors of power, and our corridor, too. And where is our Ukrainian world? Where is our Ukrainian world in Ukraine?! (Kostenko, 2010, p. 353).

The fear of repercussions of such claims and growing numbers of *svidomi* Ukrainians rather than the language politics of Yushchenko or Yanukovych led to more people switching to the Ukrainian language. This was especially evidenced in the movies *Orange Sky* (2006), *Kyiv Cake* (2014), and *Maidan* (2014), where people who used to speak Russian in their daily lives were making efforts to start speaking Ukrainian.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the low degree of negative attitudes towards Russians in the material reviewed for 2004-2014 in contrast to such attitudes post-Crimea annexation in 2014 and highly negative attitudes post-February 2022. Kostenko vividly depicted the last days of the Orange Revolution:

> And now a sweet Russian song, familiar since Soviet times, begins to dominate the Maidan – '*Orange uncles, orange aunts, orange camel*!'.[59] This is like the leitmotif of Maidan, like its nickname. And so what if the song is Russian? We are not some nationalists; we are loyal to all peoples. We are kind and generous; when we win, we share our victory with others (Kostenko, 2010, p. 405).

This is to reiterate once again that the language divide, as "real" as it was, was not meaningful for interpersonal interactions and did not constitute the *svidomi vs. not* divide. It

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[59] A very popular Soviet song for children written for Georgian signer Irma Sokhadze in 1965.

did not matter at that period in Ukrainian society, was seen as an imposition by Russia and was utilized by Ukrainian elites for electoral purposes.

The last sub-theme of this narrative dealt with issues of memory, myths, and identification. One of the most significant achievements of Yushchenko was the recognition of Holodomor [60]as a genocide. Kostenko noted that the Kuchma regime was reluctant to acknowledge it when she pondered this "controversial" subject; "Holodomor—is it genocide or not genocide, if other states recognized it as genocide, but your own parliament does not?" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 117). The Soviet Union and Russia have always denied Holodomor and the USSR elites' responsibility for it.

Zabuzhko was clear about the colonial heritage when she talked about Russia-washing Ukrainian culture and identity:

> The Ukrainian 'mass people' did not have to develop their own ideology because the Russian populism gave it a ready-made one. All that remained was to 'put Fedka[61] in a vyshyvanka[62]' (into a 'national uniform,' according to a later Soviet discourse).[63] Such support greatly accelerated the Ukrainian 'revolt of the masses, limiting and neutralizing the possible 'anti- barbarocracy influence of the 'old' intelligentsia (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 591).

She appealed to the tension between Russianized versions of Ukraine and what Ukrainians, especially *svidomi* ones, understood about themselves. Zabuzhko took it further when she situated Ukraine within the West-Russia dichotomy:

> This mythology is impeccably, one hundred percent Soviet, and it should not be surprising that in it even the Russian black-hundredists[64] became culturally closer to the Ukrainian writer, became 'his/hers' and 'ours,' than the 'decaying in the most important' European (Zabuzhko, 2007, p, 624).

This stemmed from Zabuzhko's understanding of Ukraine's Europeanness, which she rooted in Mykhailo Drahomanov's[65] ideas about Ukraine's identity:

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[60] An artificial famine created by the Stalin regime in the 1930s that took up to 5 million Ukrainian lives.
[61] Same as John Doe or average Joe in English but for Russians.
[62] Ukrainian embroidery shirt.
[63] Zabuzhko points out another yet way of de-Ukrainizing efforts of the Soviet regime.
[64] Ultra-nationalist movement in Russia in the early 20th century.
[65] Mykhailo Drahomanov (1841–1895) was a Ukrainian historian, political theorist, ethnographer, public intellectual, and civic activist. He is one of the most influential figures in the development of modern Ukrainian political thought.

1) until the 18th century, Ukraine was an organic part of the European cultural continent; 2) in the XIX century, the main (spontaneous) carrier of this cultural memory remained the peasantry; 3) the main programming task of Ukrainian nationalism ('conscious – *svidomi* – Ukrainianism') is 'return to Europe,' that is, the galvanization of this memory at the level of 'high culture' and its repeated 'integration' into already modern European politico-ideological context (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 410).

It is interesting to note that for Zabuzhko, being *svidomi* was not equated with being cultured or educated, as she acknowledged the role peasants played in preserving the Ukrainian culture despite it being Russia-washed for decades. Kostenko echoed this identity crisis when she rhetorically lamented, "Why cannot Ukrainians identify themselves as a nation, even in their own state? Can a seagull that has been boiled in porridge identify itself with itself? No, only with porridge" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 95).

If I were to theorize on how the *reality vs. imposition* narrative related to Ukraine's identity and foreign policy at the time, I would argue that predominant understanding of ethnic relations and binary divides based on language, culture, and ethnic groups being very polarized to a mutually exclusive degree, was not the case in Ukraine. It was rather the case that academics followed official narratives too much and did not pay enough attention to popular narratives. Despite these apparent differences, most Ukrainians understood that the elites manipulated people into engaging in culture wars rather than leading the country into a better future. As a result of such games that resembled the past USSR practices, people would prefer to distance themselves from undemocratic regimes such as Russia and move closer, or some would even say back, to Europe, where the government was seen as relatively more transparent and accountable to the people. This is another illustration of how Ukraine's domestic thirst for, and choice of, democratic values that are more in line with Europe than those of Russia translated into people's foreign policy preferences already long before the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022.

> So, back to Ukraine. What is happening with our patriotism today? What new metamorphoses does it undergo, and what does it mean? To be with the government, since they most often resort to this word in their rhetoric? To be against the government, since they are not pro-Ukrainian and with all their actions only erode and discredit the very notion of patriotism? To be for Ukraine in Europe, because they choose the lesser of two evils, and non-existence in Europe seems to be the greater of them? To be for Ukraine with Russia, because this goal is much more realistic, and therefore more consistent with the national aspiration? To be for Ukraine without Europeans and Russians, because in fact, we are self-sufficient, our culture is at least ten thousand years old, and we have our own unique 'Way of the Aryans'?
> *Excerpt from 'The Devil Hides in Cheese' by Yurii Andrukhovych (2006, pp.26-27)*

As time after regaining independence went on, Ukrainians got more opportunities to think about who they were, who their Others were, and how they related to them. Like in the previous decade, there was still an ongoing discussion about Ukraine's identity, future, and ontological Others. However, during the decade from 2004-2014 there was more clarity on, and there were more claims about, Ukraine's Europeanness than before. Zabuzhko provided the most coherent and conclusive narrative on Ukraine's European identity and called for reclaiming "our lost European cultural identity" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 396). She set Ukraine's Europeanness in what was Ukraine before the Russian Empire and subsequent Soviet colonization; "the cultural isolation of Ukraine from the West began only in the middle of the 18th century as a consequence of the Russian colonial policy on the annexed lands of the Hetman State"[66] (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 298). For her, the Ukrainian national idea "does not come from socialism or Marx, [but rather] it comes from European romantic nationalism" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 324), but was linked to "the nobility and chivalry" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 355) and "Protestant work ethics, which […] most unmistakably characterizes our 'Ukrainians' as the intelligentsia of industrial society" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 547). She treated

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[66] More on Hetman State can be found here:
https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CH%5CE%5CHetmanstate.htm

"the idea of Caesaropapism"[67] as "culturally alien, and so completely 'undigested' for the Ukrainian mentality" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 574).

This framing of Ukrainian national identity situated Ukraine within a European—rather than Eurasian or Slavic—tradition, historically, culturally, ideologically, and politically. It reinforced a vision of Ukraine as oriented toward European integration. Zabuzhko rejected the Russian imperial model and the Orthodox Church-centered conception of governance and national identity. Instead, she presented Ukraine as having a tradition of secularism, pluralism, and non-authoritarian religiosity, once again aligning it more closely with Western Europe than with the hierarchical and autocratic legacy of Eastern Orthodoxy. It also echoed the popular narrative of *marginal ambivalence* that emerged in the previous decade. Zabuzhko was most certain that Ukraine could and would "go back to Europe" as "our cultural 'rolling back' on the historical scale to the level of the 1860s — has been confirmed many times empirically" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 618).

The introductory quote above suggests that there are three main options that Ukrainians could choose from: be with Europe – the safest option; be with Russia – a more realistic option; or be with neither – a utopian option. I will look at these in the reversed order, starting with the last, the utopian option.

Andrukhovych was being sarcastic when he talked about the factually incorrect "ten thousand years old" culture and "special way of the Aryans" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 27). Chapeye (2011) asked many people on his way through Ukraine about their vision of Ukraine's future, and none of them suggested that Ukraine could make it without becoming a part of a bigger structure. While it would have been nice not to choose sides and be a

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[67] Caesaropapism is the idea of combining the social and political power of secular government with religious power, or of making secular authority superior to the spiritual authority of the Church; especially concerning the connection of the Church with government.

Switzerland in Eastern Europe as Andrukhovych (2006, p. 114) jokingly suggested, this was not seriously considered and it was deemed utopian and delusional throughout the novels.

The robust discourse against joining Russia stemmed from the previous decade's narrative of the *irreversible past*. All novels and movies contained overwhelming arguments against re-joining Russia in any way. Russia was depicted as the colonizer, and "the dead empire still won't let us—the living—go" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 6). Both Andrukhovych (2006, p. 29) and Kostenko (2010, pp. 107-108) expressed their fear over joining Russia-led projects such as the Custom Union. Kostenko recalled Russia's first attempt to divide Ukraine during the early days of the Orange Revolution when then-Moscow mayor Luzhkov and several Russian MPs came to Severodonetsk in Luhansk Oblast to stir up a separatist movement: "In one of the southeastern cities, a political type of sport is taking place in the Palace of Ice Sports - a congress.[68] The separatists, fueled by their own propaganda, are calling for the creation of the South-Eastern Ukrainian Autonomous Republic (PISUAR[69] for short), or even direct accession to Russia" (Kostenko, 2010, p. 396). Andrukhovych acknowledged that "[his] malice towards a brotherly country which has long become an essential part of ourselves" worried him as he "wants to love a non-imperial Russia" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 26). But at the same time, he was very skeptical about whether "Russia can be a non-empire" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 28). Out of 480 newspaper articles I read, only one article, which was sponsored by Viktor Medvedchuk[70] in a June issue of *KP* in 2013, argued for Ukraine to join the Russia-led Customs Union instead of the EU (KP, 2013).

The data showed that the Ukrainian attitude towards Russia was relatively straightforward and varied from paralyzing fear, as in *Sweet Darusia* by Mariia Matios (2004), to friendly indifference, as in some instances of Chapeye's interactions with fellow

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[68] This is a reference to the Soviet regime.
[69] This acronym means urinal in Ukrainian.
[70] Putin's close personal friend, former Ukrainian MP, who is in exile in Russia since September 2022.

Ukrainians (2011). Ukraine's views on Europe were very different. On the one hand, there was clarity regarding the European choice, as Andrukhovych said, "The geopolitical choice, therefore, was made without any hesitation: the West, the West and once again it" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 28). For Andrukhovych, as for many others, "the West" served as shorthand for the EU, NATO, or both—that is, anything associated with the West explicitly excluding Russia.

On the other hand, there was ambiguity as to how to actually accomplish it, as "our political elites now unconsciously seek to compensate with a purely formal slogan 'Membership of Ukraine in the EU'" (Zabuzhko, 2007, p. 429) as the government did not have a clear strategy in this regard. Another major hesitation was about whether Europe would actually welcome Ukraine, and Europe's presumed negative attitudes toward Ukraine. Andrukhovych summarized this problem: "Ukraine needs a European perspective like air. But it does not get this air. At the same time, from the European side, Ukraine is primarily blamed for the unpreparedness of the society and elites for European standards. But what are they and how to understand them—especially if they, these standards, are double?" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 37). Most articles also expressed the worry that the EU did not understand, trust, and respect Ukraine. Numerous newspaper articles talked about the vague possibility of lifting visa requirements for Ukrainians starting as early as 2005, while Ukraine got a visa-free regime with the EU only in 2017. "People without honor, without respect" was how Kostenko described Ukrainians in the eyes of the European community (Kostenko, 2010, p. 294). It was not surprising that Ukrainians had an "inferiority complex" when people were given German children's books to test their German language skills at the embassy or when a children's dancing band danced for three hours outside of the French embassy until they were even allowed in to submit applications for Schengen visas to attend a European dance competition (Focus, 2007).

In addition to the feeling of being treated unequally, there was another annoyance with Europe generally not telling Ukraine apart from Russia, thus conceding to the Kremlin propaganda of "two brotherly nations." Andrukhovych recalled his interactions with fellow Western writers: "The vast majority of Western colleagues, having learned where I'm from and, no doubt wanting to please me, start quoting Russian poetry or praising Russian ballet. I'm not against it, but it's just a little uncomfortable to receive compliments directed at the wrong address" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 37). He did acknowledge the difficulty that Ukraine constituted to Europe: "As much as Russia is a challenge for Ukraine, Ukraine is a challenge for the EU. At the same time, Europe needs this Ukrainian challenge like air" (Andrukhovych, 2006, p. 76). As Andrukhovych saw it, Ukraine represented both a challenge and a necessity for the EU. Just as Russia sought closer ties with Ukraine, Ukraine aspired to move closer to the EU. Yet the EU harbored similar hesitations and suspicions toward Ukraine as Ukraine did toward Russia. Crucially, however, Andrukhovych did not suggest that Ukraine needed Russia in the same way the EU needed Ukraine. Rather, he seemed to argue that the EU was incomplete without Ukraine, and Ukraine's inclusion in the EU would compel the Union to clarify its own values and serve as a test of its commitment to enlargement, democracy, and geopolitical agency.

Considering all this, I would argue that despite Ukrainians having an "inferiority complex" and feeling disrespected by the West, a pro-European foreign policy preference would be the "lesser evil" than joining any Russia-led projects. No matter how much Ukrainians did not like to be seen and treated as "Little Europeans", Europe was not framed as Ukraine's Other to the degree that Russia was, and it was still a preferred identity than being labeled "Little Russians".

Summary and Foreign Policy Implications

Comparing the narratives from 1994–2004 and the following decade, we can see that the former were more unconscious or subconscious rambling, venting about the present, and expressing trauma. The second decade narrated Ukrainian people as *svidomi*: aware, self-aware, conscious, purposeful, and driven to reach a specific goal; they were not traumatized or less so, they were active and not passive, and they were more assertive than in the first decade. We can see a clearer structure and interconnection within the narratives from 2004 to 2014. The most prominent narrative is the one of *people vs. elites*, and it fuels the other three narratives of *svidomi vs. not*, *the reality vs. imposition*, and *Ukraine and its Others*.

1994-2004	2004-2014
Enthusiastic fatalism	People vs. elites
Disoriented irreversibility	*Svidomi* vs. not
Audacious fearfulness	Reality vs. imposition
Marginal ambivalence	Ukraine and its Others

Table 1. Popular narratives, 1994-2014

It is important to reiterate that I found no evidence in the material I reviewed to support the commonly assumed binary divide based on language, as this factor was not meaningful. Instead, this binary divide was in large part an elite construction that people rejected. Ukrainians co-existed peacefully regardless of their fellow countrymen's language, ethnicity, or religion. Another observation that contrasted previous research and Ukraine's literature and cinematography, was that Russia had not been seen as an Empire or colonial

power in the Western academic literature until very recently, but in Ukraine, this has been clear from the early 1990s and this view has not changed.

The narratives of this decade re-affirmed Ukrainians' non-Russia choice of 1994–2004 and made their preference for the pro-European foreign policy clear in 2004–2014. Ukrainians voting for the portrayed pro-Russian Yanukovych in 2010 rather than pro-Western Yushchenko led a lot of researchers to re-affirm the view that Ukraine's foreign policy was balancing between the West and Russia (Kuizo, 1997; Shyrokykh, 2018; D'Anieri, 2019), or was multi-vector as during the Kuchma decade (Sherr, 1998; Wolczuk, 2003; Puglisi, 2008; Hryshko, 2010; Kravets, 2011; D'Anieri, 2012). My data offer a different interpretation, and based on the narratives reconstructed, there was no evidence found that would suggest that people's hearts swung towards pro-Russian foreign policy. The narratives of *people vs. elites* suggest that Ukrainians felt fed up equally with Kuchma in 2004, Yushchenko in 2010, and ultimately with Yanukovych in 2014. People were tired of the ineffective and corrupt elites and that can explain why they voted for Yanukovych after Yushchenko. This may not have been about the foreign policy per se, but rather about the desire for a government to get things done democratically—that is, domestic affairs were the priority.

The previous decade had relatively harmonious relations between people and elites until the end of Kuchma when he became more corrupt and undemocratic, and with Yushchenko, this tension did not disappear. Previous assumptions were that Ukrainians voted for the candidates' foreign policy platforms (Shyrokykh, 2018) or based on superficial factors such as the language spoken or ethnic identity (Riabchuk, 2012; Dostál and Jelen, 2015; Rozenberg, 2015), but it appeared that there were much deeper reasons why Ukrainians chose pro-Western foreign policy, as they voted for domestic reasons and values that were more in line with European values than those of Russia. That said, I would like to note that in my

view, the Orange Revolution in 2004 was about domestic issues primarily. The Revolution of

Dignity in 2014 was about foreign policy primarily as Yanukovych suddenly, and despite his

campaign program, pulled out of signing the Association Agreement. This supports my main

theoretical point, that domestic precedes international, and foreign policy preferences are

rooted in a democratic nation's self-perception and identity.

Chapter 6. Elites' Wayfinding for Identity and Integration, 2004-2014

Since regaining independence in 1991, Ukraine's journey has been marked by a profound quest for a cohesive national identity despite geopolitical challenges and domestic turbulence in rebuilding a state and nation. This struggle was ongoing and did not stop with the end of the Kuchma decade in 2004. Much previous research once again described Ukrainian domestic and foreign policies during the decade between the revolutions as a pendulum, swinging from the Western-friendly democratic Yushchenko to Russia-oriented authoritarian Yanukovych (Proedrou, 2010; Bozhko, 2011; Gnedina, 2015; Smith, 2016). Indeed, if we look at the maps of vote redistribution for presidential elections in 2004 and 2010, and parliamentary elections in 2007, 2012, and to a lesser degree in 2014, both the domestic East-West divide and swings are rather obvious. However, such a reading of events oversimplifies some important nuances in Ukrainian politics. Consequent interpretations of Ukrainian politics are unable to answer why what were assumed to be oppositional candidates and parties were appealing to Ukrainian society, how Ukrainians brought both the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions about, and what made both the country's elites and people unite in the face of the Russian aggression from 2014 onwards.

Additionally, binary interpretations of Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies fail to capture the complex interplay between societal dynamics and elite narratives about national identity. They also tend to overlook the full extent of Ukraine's agency in shaping its foreign policy—reducing it to a passive actor caught between Russia and the West, rather than recognizing the nuanced and strategic nature of its choices.

In this chapter, I address these issues by focusing on how Ukraine during the decade from 2004-2014 struggled to navigate through its complex history toward aspiring horizons as two presidents engaged with narratives of Ukraine's identity and its place in the world.

In this chapter, I explore how the evolution of national identity, the impact of past totalitarianism, and the steps towards European integration have shaped contemporary Ukrainian identity and politics from 2004 to 2014, in ways that were still felt at the time of writing in 2025 and provide new insights into the roots of Ukrainian national identity and foreign policy of today. By narrative analysis of the speeches, memoirs, and policy reflections of both Yushchenko and Yanukovych, in this chapter, I present their sometimes competing, yet not necessarily always contradicting, sometimes overlapping, yet continuous and complementing stories of the historical and contemporary struggles Ukraine faced in defining its national identity and path toward European integration. The most reoccurring and prominent meta-narratives in the presidents' writings were *the struggle for national identity*, *unity in diversity, the ghost and legacy of totalitarianism*, and *wayfinding toward European integration*. These narratives remain relevant to Ukraine's contemporary political landscape, especially in post-2014 and post-2022 developments, and Ukraine's relations with the EU and Russia.

This chapter consists of three main parts. I start with an exposition of how both presidents engaged with and responded to the people's narratives on the issues related to national identity and foreign policy. I will emphasize how Yushchenko's and Yanukovych's narratives either coincided and complemented each other, or diverged in their visions for implementation, rather than contradicted each other in meaningful divisive ways. Then, I will synthesize the elites' narratives and compare them against the popular narratives, highlighting key points of overlapping and diversion between the people and elites. In conclusion, I show how Yushchenko's and Yanukovych's foreign policy preferences were not as oppositional as they had been previously characterized but rather were complementary and reflective of and rooted in the narratives' interplay and Ukraine's identity developments that can be traced since regaining independence in 1991.

Yushchenko and Yanukovych Navigating Histories and Horizons

Before turning to elite narratives about national identity and foreign policy, it is important to highlight some aspects of continuity from the previous decade that overlap with popular narratives. These continuities in Ukraine's foreign policy are particularly significant given that it has often been characterized as incoherent and inconsistent (Larrabee, 2006; Makar, 2008; Budkin, 2011; Kuzio, 2012; Kravets, 2012; White and Feklyunina, 2014; Babenko, 2017). I argue, however, that these overlapping patterns—though often marked by hesitation and a lack of assertiveness—reflect a form of inconsistent consistency in Ukraine's ongoing pursuit of European integration. By "inconsistent consistency," I mean that despite apparent contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions in Ukraine's foreign policy, these contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions were narrated, managed, and rationalized by the elites in ways that allowed the whole of Ukraine's foreign policy trajectory to function as if it was consistent. While the contradictions (or rather how I see them—hesitations) observed by previous research were present, they were not necessarily seen as flaws by the elites. Instead, these contradictions (hesitations) were woven into the logic of Ukraine's wayfinding in a manner that still seemed reasonable or "consistent" to Ukrainians.

First, both Yushchenko and Yanukovych repeatedly tried to separate their foreign policy preferences from those of Kuchma to make them sound more decisively "pro-European" or "pro-Western." Yushchenko accused Kuchma of his "multi-vector" foreign policy of "trying to sit on two chairs at once" that led to "both the West and the East talking to Ukraine through clenched teeth" (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 85). However, when Yushchenko discussed navigating relations with the West and Russia, he adopted a similar stance to his predecessor, narrating Ukraine's foreign policy as irreversibly aimed at EU and NATO integration as the "people's democratic choice" (Yushchenko, 2010, pp. 102, 216, 235). Yanukovych joined Yushchenko when he criticized his being torn in "dilemma between

integration alternatives" (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 26), called Kuchma "his biggest disappointment" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 11) and disapproved his declarative policies (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 48) yet still used similar, "pragmatic" framings for his pro-EU integration policies and vision to utilize "the uniqueness of the location of Ukraine as a bridge connecting East and West" (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 9). He was convinced that "Ukraine's foreign policy should be determined by pragmatism" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 126) and promised to bring about "Europragmatism, instead of Euroromanticism" (Yanukovych, 2006, pp. 12-13). Yanukovych's rhetoric on NATO membership changed over time from full support as it would be "the locomotive of the EU integration strategy" (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 23) to saying that "pulling Ukraine into NATO against the will of the majority of the population led to the subsequent split of society" (Yanukovych, 2008, p. 319). He insisted on a NATO membership referendum if it came to that, "[h]owever, no matter what happens in this connection, there is no need to doubt the European course of our country (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 62), thus reaffirming his firm commitment to European integration. Additionally, to "pragmatic," he worded this pro-EU vector in the same language as Kuchma and Yushchenko as "the main geopolitical task of the state" (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 42), "continuation of the course towards European integration" (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 10), "European choice" (Yanukovych, 2008, p. 42), "strategical objective" (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 47), and "unchanging and irreversible" (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 69).

Both Yushchenko and Yanukovych also stressed that a strategic partnership with Russia, which they described as Ukraine's "eternal economic partner," should be mutually beneficial and responsible (Yushchenko, 2005, p. 135; Yushchenko, 2010, p. 230; Yanukovych, 2004, p. 45; Yanukovych, 2005, p. 193), while rejecting any attempts to reunite with Russia as futile, arguing that Ukraine and Russia were distinct nations with different histories, identities, and futures (Yushchenko 2014, pp. 469, 483; Yanukovych, 2005, pp.

213-214). Yushchenko and Yanukovych continued Kuchma's policy of advocating for equal partnerships with both the East and the West, without viewing them in an "either-or" context (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 81; Yanukovych, 2005, p. 91). These perceptions and ideas regarding Ukraine's foreign policy and its national interests were neither unique to Yushchenko or Yanukovych nor original to their presidencies. Rather, they can be traced back to Kuchma's multilateral and pragmatic foreign policy, which laid the groundwork for narratives that continued to resonate among both the public and the elites in the decades following independence.

Secondly, just like Kuchma, Yushchenko and Yanukovych were concerned with the inertia inherited from the Soviet regime that penetrated both ordinary people and the elites' mentality and was still affecting the government's approach to implementing reforms and policies that would advance EU integration. While Yushchenko emphasized that Ukraine "had problems both with psychological inertia 'on the ground' and with the remnants of the past at the top'" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 127), Yanukovych focused more on the material inertia as "Ukraine inherited the remains of a formerly unified economic system" (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 52; Yanukovych, 2007, p. 10) and "problems of distribution of the Union's property, including intellectual property, demarcation of borders, incomplete formation of the national identity of states, etc." (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 28). Yushchenko, however, took this point further than Kuchma and narrated the inertia and its effect not only as a "communist yoke" but framed it as the result of prolonged colonialism when he said that "when the European nations were creating national revivals, we were a colony" (Yushchenko, 2014, pp. 504-505). Yushchenko was clear in his condemnation of the Soviet regime as colonial and was in line with the popular narratives from Kuchma's decade, as they deemed the USSR as a colonial power while Kuchma did not. Yanukovych refrained from the colonial language and softly hinted at "legitimate fears about the possibility of

reproduction in a new form of 'integration' of the imperial dictate" (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 28). This connection of the post-independence inertia to the perception of the Soviet regime as colonial and fears of the potential rebirth of the Empire bridged over both the continuity from Kuchma's era and alignments between the popular narratives of the Other and elites' narratives of the past and present.

When it came to overlaps with the popular narratives during the decade between 2004 and 2014, Yushchenko's narratives nicely intertwined with all four narratives from the previous chapter to various degrees. He responded to the *people vs. elites* narrative by repeatedly emphasizing the ongoing "struggle between good and evil, between a gangster regime and democracy" (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 23) and echoing the popular narratives that "in Ukraine, we still have an unprofessional, unpatriotic and non-Ukrainian government" (Yushchenko, 2003, p. 76). He also resonated with the narrative of *svidomi vs. not*, as he sorrowfully recollected the tension in Ukrainian society during the Orange Revolution and the falsifications during the second round of presidential elections. He observed that "[t]his was the lowest sin: Ukrainians were divided into those who, despite the most terrible poverty, would never sell their life values for money, and those whose hands are not burned by these silver coins" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 290). Yet he put the responsibility of such a divide not on the "not *svidomi*" but on those who benefited from the *reality vs. imposition* narrative, as he condemned the authoritarianism during Kuchma's second term noting that "[t]he government systematically pursues a policy of 'controlled splits,' sometimes tightening and then loosening the strings. The lines of division are drawn along language, religion, and history" (Yushchenko, 2003, p. 58). He took it further and tied this practice to the colonial inertia inherited from the Soviet regime, as he rhetorically asked, "How was it possible to establish the idea of national solidarity over inherited age-old problems—metastases of the old imperial divisions based on language, church, memory, heroes... in the end, divisions into

West and East [of Ukraine]" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 373). Yushchenko acknowledged the challenges of rebuilding a unified national identity in Ukraine, attributing the divisions— particularly the constructed dichotomy between East and West—to the legacy of imperial rule and its imposed divisions. Finally, Yushchenko was critical of both the EU's hesitancy towards Ukraine (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 458) and Russia's perception of Ukraine (Yushchenko, 2010, p. 34; Yushchenko, 2014, pp. 257, 364-365) that fit the popular narrative of *Ukraine and its Others*.

Yanukovych responded to the popular narratives less explicitly than Yushchenko and from a different yet not necessarily incompatible angle. He regretted that his team "were forced to take on all the negativity of the actions of [Kuchma] and representatives of local authorities in certain regions. Too late, we distanced ourselves from the so-called 'help' of the authorities" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 190). He tried to separate himself from the "bad elites" and showed that he resonated with the people as he urged his government to "talk to people—from Chernigov to Crimea, from Lugansk to Lvov—everywhere you will hear the same complaints and problems" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 209). Yanukovych indirectly addressed the narrative *svidomi vs. not* while being in the opposition in 2005. He was critical of the Orange Revolution of 2004, which he called "the fruit of artificial insemination" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 111) and wanted "to overcome the split that has arisen in Ukrainian society because of erroneous policies that have effectively divided citizens into 'ours' and 'theirs'" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 126). It is unclear whether he echoed the Kremlin's interpretation of the Orange Revolution here and thought the West instigated it, or it was instigated by the Yushchenko team alone rather than the ordinary people of Ukraine. However, his emphasis was on moving forward towards unity, rather than revisiting the past—whether that past was the more distant Soviet era or the recent divisions of the Orange Revolution. Considering that he lost the 2004 elections, such an attitude and desire to

distance himself from it are not surprising. As for the *reality vs. imposition* narrative,

Yanukovych did not blame Ukraine's colonial past but focused on federalization as a possible

solution to reconcile regional differences (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 126). He acknowledged the

existing differences in faiths, languages, and ethnic backgrounds. However, he did not see

them as irreconcilable or threatening the unity and integrity of Ukraine, as he advocated for

"the idea of uniting everyone rather than the unification of 'ours.' We are different, but

united" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 191). Like Yushchenko, Yanukovych was critical of what he

saw as the EU's misunderstanding, mistreatment, and hesitation towards Ukraine

(Yanukovych, 2005, p. 206; Yanukovych, 2004, pp. 11-15; Yanukovych, 2008, p. 42) and

resonated with the peoples' narrative of *Ukraine and its Others.*

Both Yushchenko and Yanukovych attempted to distinguish their foreign policy from

Kuchma's by emphasizing a "pro-European" stance, yet their approaches similarly involved

navigating relations pragmatically with both the West and Russia. Yushchenko and

Yanukovych framed post-independence inertia as a colonial legacy, which continued to

influence Ukraine's reform efforts and aligned with public narratives of the Soviet Union as a

colonial power. The elite narratives between 2004 and 2014 resonated with public sentiments,

emphasizing the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, imposed societal

divisions, and criticisms of both the EU and Russia's attitudes towards Ukraine. This suggests

that successful political leadership in Ukraine would require a strong resonance with popular

narratives, emphasizing the importance of leaders who could articulate and advocate for

national identity and democratic values in ways that reflect Ukrainians' experiences and

aspirations. Should the opposite happen, one could expect the people's resistance, as in 2004

when Kuchma's actions derailed from his own narratives and those of the general public.

Now, I will look closer at the elites' narratives on national identity and foreign policy.

Narrative 1: *Struggle for National Identity*

> Ukrainian society, which is still struggling and slowly searching for answers to many questions about its national identity, state, language, and culture, needs a new reading of Shevchenko. Shevchenko has already offered his answers. They exist, have proven their strength, and cannot be rejected. His opinions can support Ukrainian society in searching for the right political decisions on which the state and nation's future depends.
>
> *Excerpt from 28 weeks of Ukrainian History (Yushchenko, 2003, p. 20)*

By appealing to Taras Shevchenko, the most prominent Ukrainian poet, writer, and public figure, Yushchenko emphasized the importance of the Ukrainian language, culture, and historical memory as foundations for reviving Ukraine's national identity. Throughout all his memoirs and speeches, he discussed in depth the suppression of the Ukrainian language, culture, and nation during the Soviet era and the need for its revival to strengthen Ukrainian statehood and national consciousness (being *svidomi*) in the times after regaining independence and post-Orange Revolution. Yushchenko's discussion of Ukraine's national identity was within the following four interrelated sub-themes: identity as a process of nation and state (re)-building; civic dimensions of identity; the importance of becoming progressively *svidomi* during the identity process that is rooted in the historical myths, and guidance by rediscovering and reaffirming Ukraine's Europeanness.

Yanukovych, in contrast, evoked the language of being *svidomi* to a lesser degree than Yushchenko, when he pragmatically connected Ukrainian national identity and people's foreign policy preference:

> At the same time, we are aware [*svidomi*] that the current course concerns us first of all—the European self-identification of the Ukrainian people, the strategic orientations of internal transformations, the logic of deepening the transformational processes, and the politics of the reforms being implemented. It is about the realization of the civilizational choice of Ukraine in favor of European values, the transformation of the institutional system of our country into institutions of the European model, the approval of European standards of socio-economic and political development, the corresponding level and quality of life of the population (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 10).

He refrained from using the language of "suppression" of the Ukrainian culture during the Soviet regime, and the grievances of the past in general. Instead, he aimed to refocus on what could be done in the present and future to ensure Ukraine's success. He framed the people's civilizational turn towards the EU as a logical consequence of the people's self-perception as a European nation, which assumed a processual transformation for the state to implement.

Identity as a process of nation and state (re)-building

Both Yushchenko and Yanukovych viewed Ukraine's independence not merely as a historical moment or starting point but as part of an ongoing process of reviving the nation's identity. Yushchenko likened the history of Ukrainian independence to a mountain avalanche, describing it as "a culmination of prolonged, *inconspicuous societal processes*, conflicts of memory, and accumulated economic contradictions. This critical mass suddenly transformed the historical landscape in moments" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 81). The comparison of Ukrainian independence to a mountain avalanche emphasizes the importance of underlying societal processes and conflicts. It implies that significant historical changes often result from long-term, cumulative factors rather than isolated events. Yanukovych complemented Yushchenko and said that the choice of integration into the EU, which stemmed from Ukraine's regaining independence, "*crystallizes* from the centuries-old history of the Ukrainian people, their mentality, ethnic roots, and democratic traditions, from the desire of the current generation to see their state in a united Europe." (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 9). By highlighting factors like mentality, ethnic roots, and democratic traditions, he suggested that the EU integration aligned with a broader, almost inevitable historical trajectory, reflecting Ukraine's longstanding European ties and democratic ideals. Yanukovych appealed to both

historical legitimacy and collective national identity, framing the EU orientation as a realization of Ukraine's inherent path.

Yushchenko also connected this process to the public's choice of EU integration, noting, "[t]he Ukrainian people want to see Ukraine as a highly developed, democratic European state. 75% of citizens consider themselves patriots of Ukraine. 70% of Ukrainians feel proud of their national anthem and Ukrainian flag. *We have changed. We are becoming free*" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 28). For Yushchenko, the public's desire for Ukraine to align with European democratic and developmental standards translated into the public's preference for EU integration. Echoing Kuchma's narratives, Yushchenko emphasized the importance of both nation and state-building, stating, "[w]e have an independent state, now we need to create, revive the nation…There is a nation. It exists. It has genetic memory" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 441). This is important because he recognized the existence of a Ukrainian nation with a deep-rooted genetic memory,[71] suggesting that Ukraine's national identity was both historical and evolving.

Civic dimensions of identity

In contrast to what has been overemphasized in previous research on Yushchenko's views on Ukraine's national identity, it is clear that, while wanting Ukrainian citizens to

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[71] In this context, genetic memory means historical memory, rather than appeals to essentialist perspectives on national identity. For example, in a 2013 Den article titled "The Ukrainian Maidan Phenomenon: Historical and Genetic Memory", Maidan (Independence Square in Kyiv) is more than just a gathering space; it symbolizes our deep-rooted democracy, ingrained in Ukrainians' genetic memory. Throughout history—from the Cossack era to Prince Volodymyr's Rus—Maidan has repeatedly served as a place to announce key decisions, including princely charters, hetman's universals, and the Pereyaslav Council. This unique tradition unites political leaders and the people, functioning as a form of democratic voting, consultation, and even a prototype of a modern national council. As a reflection of Ukrainians' mentality and traditions, this form of public expression has endured for centuries and will continue to do so. Another article talks about literature as a nation's genetic memory. It argues that for two centuries, the Romanov and Soviet empires stifled Ukrainian literature, limiting it to depictions of peasants as victims or avengers of national grievances. However, a nation's growth requires an elite with dignity and a winner's mindset. Ancient Ukrainian literature, written by and for such individuals, proves that Ukrainians can be rightful stewards of their land, capable of building a strong state and addressing issues on a continental scale.

rediscover and recenter the Ukrainian language and culture as tools of state- and nation-

building, he was a strong proponent of civic national identity rather than one based on

ethnicity.

> Today, the average Ukrainian citizen must solve three problems simultaneously. First, one must become a Ukrainian. Let me clarify: one needs to become a patriot of Ukraine. One must love one's language, education, culture, and literature. We must create our own national memory and have our own national heroes - not Pavlik Morozovs,[72] not Catherines the Second,[73] not Stalins, but those who made your nation and laid the foundations of its independence. Second, at the same time, a Ukrainian must become a democrat and learn this complex philosophy […] intensive and continuous training awaits us – from morning to evening and every day. Learning how to become a citizen of a population and how to become a nation awaits us. Third. It is necessary to raise the sails of democracy and patriotism and go to the European harbor. (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 507)

Here, Yushchenko invited all citizens of Ukraine to be engaged in the processes of

reconstructing Ukrainian identity, decolonizing themselves, and further integration with the

EU. For Yushchenko to be(come) Ukrainian was to be(come) a patriot of the Ukrainian state

and only then to be(come) dedicated to rediscovering and re-creating national and cultural

elements of this state.

In early 2010s, Ukraine was still in the ongoing process of defining and consolidating

a distinct national identity separate from the Russian influence that had affected much of its

past. That was why Yushchenko called for Ukrainians to decolonize, build a collective

national memory, and identify with heroes who represent the nation's history and struggle for

independence rather than figures from Soviet or Russian history and mythologies.

Yushchenko also implied that integration with the EU requires both democratic

maturity and a strong sense of national identity, suggesting that Ukraine's future in Europe

was contingent upon its success in these two challenges. The focus on becoming democratic

citizens linked to the preferred foreign policy demonstrates how the domestic is

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[72] Pavlik Morozov was a Soviet teenager who allegedly reported his own father to the Soviet authorities and then was killed by his family. He was portrayed as a martyr, and his story was mythologized for role-modeling for children to adhere to communist policies.
[73] Otherwise known as Catherine the Great

interconnected with the international. It also supports this thesis' premise that identity

narratives drove Ukraine's foreign policy. They did so by shaping Ukraine's alliances,

values, and strategic direction. By rejecting Russian historical figures and embracing its own

cultural and democratic identity, Ukraine symbolically and politically distanced itself from

Russian influence and aligned with European institutions. A strong Ukrainian identity

legitimized the country's pursuit of EU integration, as Ukrainians who saw themselves as

European were more likely to support pro-Western policies. National identity also determined

Ukraine's perception of allies (the EU and the West in general) and adversaries (Russia),

reinforcing its foreign policy dynamic since 2014.

Additionally, identity strengthened Ukraine's sovereignty, countering Russia's denial

of its independence. The ongoing war with Russia further highlighted this connection, as

Ukrainians were fighting not just for territory but for their right to exist as a distinct nation

with its own foreign policy. This interconnection shows that a country's internal sense of self

shapes its global position, demonstrating how domestic identity formation directly influences

foreign policy choices.

Yanukovych echoed Yushchenko's views on the civic and patriotic dimensions of

Ukraine's identity:

> By and large, if we talk about the future, I am for everyone to have one symbolism -
> the Ukrainian flag and the Ukrainian coat of arms. I am for this so that we do not
> irritate ourselves with different colors and do not make a show out of it. Or, as they
> say, all the colors of the rainbow have the right to exist in life. And whoever likes the
> color, that is what they wear. And as for the state approach, I think there should be
> one color for all of us, the national flag color (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 117).

Yanukovych wanted to look beyond the external differences and foster a unified, civic, and

patriotic national identity for Ukraine. By emphasizing the Ukrainian national flag and coat

of arms, he wanted to promote unity and discourage division. He suggested that individual

preference for different "colors" could exist in private life, but public collective identity

should be civic and unified to avoid "irritation" or "making a show". This shows Yanukovych's desire for national cohesion and the avoidance of fragmentation.

When it came to the traditionally "divisive" aspects of the Ukrainian national identity, such as ethnicity, language, and religion, both Yushchenko's and Yanukovych's views were aligned with those of the general public. They did not consider them meaningful or constitutive of the nation's identity to the degree previous research has argued (Kropatcheva, 2011; Korostelina, 2013; Tarnavsky, 2018).

Yushchenko saw language issues, real and imagined, as inherited during Ukraine's time in the Soviet Union. He believed that language was not only a national category, but a state-building tool needed to secure Ukraine's statehood, distinctiveness, sovereignty, and, ultimately, its national and state identity. He reflected on the role of a state language in modern Ukraine and the challenges both the elite and people met:

> Independent Ukraine, its politicians, and society have a long and difficult path to such an understanding of the language. One of the reasons for this, of course, is the prolonged isolation from European thought. For seventy years, Ukrainians were taught to believe in the existence of a whimsical "Soviet culture," socialist in content and national in form. This construction was supposed to somehow decently justify the existence of the "Soviet people" beaten to pieces by violence. Now we see that there is no invented "Soviet person." But there are Russians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Estonians, and other peoples who chose to form modern nations on the path of independence. The Ukrainian language plays a unique political role in defining national identity and forming statehood. The state role of the Ukrainian language is not aimed at limiting the development of other languages. But the erosion of statehood of the Ukrainian language means the erosion of statehood itself. Instead of anathemas or mourning the Russian language in Ukraine, it would be worthwhile to learn from the Russians their attitude towards the state language. The whole of Russia, the state, and the people are united in understanding that the Russian language is the basis of the foundations of the nation (Yushchenko, 2003, p. 31).

Yushchenko was aware that Ukraine was "a country where several million people communicate in Russian, it is their mother tongue, they want their children to know it as well" (Yushchenko, 2005, p. 138). He argued for people's right to speak whatever language they wanted to and that "the state must listen to them and remember that they are citizens of

Ukraine. They have the right to choose, and the state must make all the conditions for this person to feel worthy, including language policy" (Yushchenko, 2005, p. 138). When Yushchenko was the Head of the National Bank of Ukraine before becoming Prime Minister and then President, he had to work with Russia-born Ukrainians who only spoke Russian, which was not an issue for him (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 209). He defended the people of Donbas when he says,

> [o]ne should not look at a person of my age who lives in Donetsk and speaks a foreign language, and think that he is not Ukrainian. He is also Ukrainian! I understand that I should not expect to hear the Ukrainian language from his lips because I know that, for various reasons, he no longer has a motive to learn this language. Despite everything, I feel good about this person; I understand why he is the way he is today. For me, it was the most important task and a big dream to hear his children and grandchildren speak the national language (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 508).

Here, Yushchenko recognized the context of Soviet and Russian colonialism, linguistic oppression of the Ukrainian language, and forced Russification of the region, hence the framing of the Russian language as foreign. He hoped that in due course, Ukraine's citizens would decolonize and choose to speak Ukrainian, a trend supported by post-2014 and post-2022 research.

Yanukovych acknowledged that he spoke Ukrainian poorly sometimes but rejected the idea that this reflected negatively on his patriotism and dedication to the Ukrainian state. He said, "I will learn the language. But if someone wanted to accuse me of being less of a patriot than someone who 'speaks Ukrainian beautifully', I will tell you, I am ready to argue with that. I am ready to give my life for Ukraine" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 118). His personal reflection on the connection between language and national identity mirrored those of many Ukrainians from the East of Ukraine, including many Russian-speaking soldiers fighting on the frontlines (Beszmertna, 2022). During his premiership under Yushchenko, Yanukovych was clear about the status of the Ukrainian language:

> The state language in Ukraine is the Ukrainian language. The Party of Regions has never denied this. And does not deny it. Moreover, we believe that there is a need to develop the Ukrainian language in our state, especially in the eastern and southern

regions. What is needed is a truly intelligent, balanced program that would gradually, step by step, organically introduce the Ukrainian language into the lives of citizens. Such a program would bring many benefits. And vice versa - impudent, rude, reckless Ukrainization, which creates many problems in the daily lives of our compatriots, is more harmful to the development of the Ukrainian language than any idea of Russian as a second official language (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 4).

This balanced, pragmatic approach was in line with Yushchenko's objective for the Ukrainian language being organically introduced into the daily use in the East of Ukraine. He clarified that the language spoken does not factor into his or Donbas Ukrainians' foreign policy preferences. He said: "I come from the East of Ukraine, where the first language of the majority of the population is Russian. A certain misunderstanding is also connected with this. Some believe that the cultural influence of Russia and the native language of people like me are proof of the pro-Russian nature of the Party of Regions. This is not so" (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 62). He exemplified this further by how Spanish-speaking members of the US Congress were not pro anything but their state. He affirmed "that [his] party or any other Ukrainian party is not sufficiently committed to the cultural unity and political independence of the sovereign Ukrainian state" (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 63). It is impossible to say whether he believed what he said, but this was his narrative of being a Ukrainian patriot that got him elected.

Yanukovych did, in fact, play with the idea of making Russian a second state language (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 196) as he believed that "[w]e actually have two languages and one people" (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 4). This was often mentioned in the previous research (Proedrou, 2010; Kropatcheva, 2011; Korostelina, 2013; Kuzio, 2015; Samokhvalov, 2015) and mistakenly linked to his or Russian-speaking Ukrainians' foreign policy preferences. However, Yanukovych or his party never actually attempted to make this happen. He argued that "many countries in the world, including those in Western Europe, are bilingual. But does this threaten them with the loss of national identity? The issue of the status of the Russian language in Ukraine is a question of protecting the constitutional rights

of millions of our fellow citizens. Our slogan is 'Two languages – one people!'"
(Yanukovych, 2005, p. 213). Yanukovych connected this issue with integration with the EU
as he proposes that "[d]ecentralization of power would be a real step towards Ukraine's
European integration. The experience of Europe shows that strengthening regional identity
does not weaken state identity" (Yanukovych, 2008, pp. 234-235). Yanukovych presented the
idea of making Russian a second state language as a matter of civil rights and European
integration. However, deeper tensions about Ukraine's identity and foreign policy laid
beneath this rhetoric. He insisted that bilingualism would not threaten national unity, yet
given Ukraine's experiences of Russian dominance, it made it a politically charged and
imposed issue. Despite his words, he never took concrete steps to make it a reality, perhaps
recognizing how harmful it was. In 2014, Russia's invasion made it clear that language in
Ukraine was not about communication, nor was it a real domestic issue; it was tied to power,
sovereignty, and survival. In the years since, many Ukrainians have embraced the Ukrainian
language more strongly than ever, rejecting Yanukovych's "Two languages—one people"
vision (cite).

Regarding religion, Yushchenko believed it was a private matter and not something to
be politicized and instrumentalized as a divisive narrative. Still, he celebrated unity during
the Orange Revolution when "joint prayers of hundreds of thousands of people on the
Maidan: Christians, Jews, and Muslims prayed together, each according to their custom"
(Yushchenko, 2005, p. 160). Throughout his speeches, he appealed to all Ukrainians when he
said, "Ukrainian and Russian-speaking, Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, all Christians, Muslims
and Jews, our peasantry, intelligentsia, working class and military: there is no difference
between us. With the thought of the future, we must follow a single nation's creation path
because only its monolith will protect and save us in the new century" (Yushchenko, 2010b,
p. 41). Similarly, Yanukovych acknowledged the religious diversity in Ukraine: "Ukraine is

and will remain a country of great cultural diversity. We have the largest Jewish community in Europe. I have many Muslim friends, and we have many Christian denominations, including at least three Orthodox ones." (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 62). He upheld "the unambiguous position" that he was "against fanning any inter-confessional hostility in our country. We respect the rights of believers of all faiths" (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 5). These narratives of mutual respect, equality, and separation of state and religion signify both presidents' vision for a civic, non-religious, and tolerant identity for Ukraine, which aligns with the popular narrative of *social ambivalence* and disprove the speculations that religious affiliation was neither a divisive parameter of Ukrainian national identity, nor somehow suggested a foreign policy preference as some of the previous research attempted to argue (Fomina, 2014).

Both Yushchenko and Yanukovych advocated for a Ukraine that respected linguistic and religious diversity, recognizing the right of citizens to speak their preferred language and practice their faith without fear. They envisioned a unified nation where all Ukrainians, regardless of language or religion, worked together to build a strong and cohesive future while also hoping for a gradual shift towards embracing the Ukrainian language as a symbol of decolonization and becoming more *svidomi* (Onuch and Tucker, 2018), which fits this thesis's premise that identity is not a static measure but a dynamic process.

Becoming *svidomi*

Yushchenko's ideas of identity as a process of nation- and state-building and its civic dimension were connected to his calls for Ukrainians to become more *svidomi*, and responded to the popular narrative of *svidomi vs. not*. Here, Yushchenko appealed to Shevchenko and his "national consciousness" mission of being nationally *svidomi*. Specifically, he said:

It is through him that today, the revival of national consciousness and dignity of Ukraine – a damaged, post-genocidal society – takes place. According to his truth, I sincerely believe a real, strong, and confident Ukraine will emerge when a single national idea unites its people. The national idea is a Ukrainian, European Ukraine. It is one state language. It is the emergence of the Local Church.[74] It is freedom for every citizen and respect for their rights, views, and choices. It is a European choice that returns Ukraine to its natural civilization space. (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 339-340)

Yushchenko acknowledged the consequences of Ukraine's colonial past and the nation's mental condition after it regained independence in 1991. His desire for a single state language and an independent Church did not contradict his vision for a civic national identity as he was inclusive of all citizens. These should be seen as his preferred ways of becoming *svidomi*—to both symbolically and substantially decolonize Ukraine and citizens of Ukraine from the Soviet and Russian heritage. As the "European choice of Ukraine took place in the hearts and minds of Ukrainians" (Yushchenko, 2005, p. 108), Yushchenko connected the domestic revival of national consciousness with its consequential preference in foreign policy.

Similar to Yushchenko, Yanukovych connected the domestic with the international and being *svidomi* with being democratic when he says, "we are aware [*svidomi*] that deepening democracy is a necessary condition for our progress [into the EU]" (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 35). He also resonated with Yushchenko's language of "becoming" and assigned responsibility to the elite to ensure that moving toward a unified national identity was possible: "To achieve a *nationwide shift*, we must first create conditions in society under which the government will not divide Ukraine into "patriots" and "sellouts", into "Europeans" and "all the rest". When every citizen of Ukraine, regardless of where they were born—in the West or in the East, what language they speak, what religion they belong to—will feel equally comfortable in their country" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 8). His understanding

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[74] This refers to Yushchenko's aspiration for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to gain independence from the Russian Orthodox Church. This goal was realized in 2019 when Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, signed the tomos, officially recognizing the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and granting it autocephaly (self-governance).

of the need for a national shift was tightly connected with the notion of Ukraine being a civic state that would fit the European family.

Yushchenko and Yanukovych invited their fellow Ukrainians to an open dialogue and identity quest as "[o]nly through an honest, painful answer to ourselves, only through awareness of our Ukrainian belonging, will a new life and a new future open up for us. The victory of the nation and the state over slavery" (Yushchenko, 2010a, p. 12). This call for all citizens of Ukraine to look for their identity and future, and the invitation to rediscover their roots and reinvent a new European Ukraine, resonated with both narratives of early Kuchma and popular narratives from 1994 to 2004. This is yet another example of the ongoing struggle in the process of decolonization and rediscovering who Ukrainians were and where they were going, which leads to the last sub-theme of this narrative of the struggle for national identity.

Roots and future: Ukraine's Europeanness through time and space

In contrast to Kuchma, and more in alignment with the popular narratives of both decades, Yushchenko was a firm believer in both Ukraine as a historical nation-state and the historical Europeanness of Ukraine. For him, unlike his predecessor, Ukraine's regaining independence in 1991 was not a clean slate start for the Ukrainian state and not a *tabula rasa* for Ukrainian identity, but rather a significant momentum in the ongoing centenarian struggle of the nation for freedom, self-determination, and sovereignty. He shared his perception of historical Ukraine when he wrote in 2009, "[w]e are not 18 years old. Behind us is the thousand-year history of our Kyivan Rus. Our state has happened, and its latest restoration is an exceptional historical achievement for the Ukrainian people. Ukraine was, Ukraine is, Ukraine will always be" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 42). Yanukovych connected the idea of the

"centuries-old history of the Ukrainian people, their mentality, ethnic roots, and democratic traditions" to the people's choice towards European integration as it is "the current generation to see their state in a united Europe" (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 9). Here, the notions of past, present, and future are interconnected and resonate with the previous decade's popular narratives, thus further demonstrating continuity in Ukraine's foreign policy.

Both Yushchenko's and Yanukovych's perspectives on Ukraine's historical identity diverged from Kuchma's, as they strongly asserted the deep-rooted historical nationhood and Europeanness of Ukraine; they went further than Kuchma's "*Ukraine is not Russia*" position and affirmed that *Ukraine is Europe*.

Even when Yushchenko talked about Donbas and East of Ukraine in general, he was just as sure that "Europeans are present in Donetsk. These are people who will never say that they are neighbors of Europe. In my village of Khoruzhivka in Sumy Oblast, I also do not want to feel like a neighbor to Europe and affirm that I *am* a European. I live in the center of Europe and do not need to be acknowledged as a European by others" (Yushchenko, 2005, p. 126). Yushchenko did not doubt that, Ukrainians were Europeans, not mere neighbors to Europe, and they did not need to prove this to anyone, as if there was some checklist of being European, but to accept this and live out this reality because "we are Europe" (Yushchenko, 2005, p. 220). For him, understanding Ukrainian national identity as European was the reason why Ukraine should pursue European integration as its foreign policy. At the same time, although "Russia is our eternal neighbor, our strategic partner" (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 79), he "sharply reject[ed] any new attempts to impose the ideology of Little Russianness and nurturing foreign traditions on Ukraine" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 34). Yushchenko was clear that Ukrainians were not Russian or Little Russians but were a distinct European nation and sovereign neighbors to Russia, which was its own nation, state, and cultural space.

Acknowledging that Ukraine was not an ethnically homogeneous state, Yushchenko sought to reconcile the country's cultural diversity with its place in the modern world. In addressing a self-perceived national inferiority complex, he urged citizens to "value your originality and what sets us apart from others. We were once ashamed of our 'southern arrogance';[75] now, we are ashamed of the fact that we are not Europeans or not 'European enough.' The globalized world strives for diversity, and in such a world, our culture will always be in demand" (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 86). As for his vision for Ukraine's future, it, just like in the case with Kuchma, was only possible within greater Europe through integration with the EU and other Western alliances.

Yushchenko's certainty that Ukraine's future was with and within the EU stemmed from his firm belief that Ukraine was not only Europe then but always has been. Additionally, to Kuchma's central argument that Ukraine was Europe simply because of its geographical location, with Europe's center being in the Ukrainian town of Rakhiv,[76] Yushchenko's claims for Ukraine's Europeanness were within historical, cultural, and ideational realms. He saw modern-day Ukrainians as heirs of the "nation who stood on the guard of European civilization in the times of Kyiv Rus" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 197) and should be proud that "the first Constitution in Europe was Ukrainian as Pylyp Orlyk, its author, in 1710 became the first leader of the nation, who publicly swore to the Constitution" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 271). Factual correctness is not as important here because he was confident that "Ukraine does not need to prove its Europeanness, belonging to European history or culture" (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 79), just as any other European country did not need to prove theirs. He also referenced Johann Herder, Konrad Adenauer (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 241),

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[75] This is about the times Ukrainians were under the Russian Empire and USSR rule and were described as underdeveloped, uncultured, and uncivilized people compared to their "big brother", Russians.

[76] This claim is problematic as Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and Belarus are among other countries that have also made similar claims for various purposes. However, this claim still, in part, contributes to the overall narrative of both Kuchma and Yushchenko on Ukraine's rights to be included in the European community of states.

Alexander Kwasniewski (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 52), Pope John Paul II (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 269), and others to shape his narrative of Ukraine belonging to Europe by situating Ukraine within their views on Ukraine's Europeanness.

Yushchenko's conviction that Ukraine is European was also rooted in recent history. The Orange Revolution was the manifestation of Ukrainians' Europeanness as "citizens of Ukraine resolutely defended their rights and dignity. The Ukrainian people have proven their commitment to common European values" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 256). He concluded that "as a European nation, a co-creator of European history, culture, and spiritual ideals, we see our future in a united democratic Europe and the system of the Euro-Atlantic security system" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 360). Yushchenko's argument that Ukraine's future was within the EU, based on a mixture of historical, cultural, and ideational claims, reflected a solid desire to position Ukraine's identity in Europe, even at the expense of historical accuracy. While he risked oversimplifying complex historical realities, and overlooked the potential for critical scholarship to challenge these claims, his narrative encouraged Ukrainians to overcome their national inferiority complex, celebrate Ukraine's European roots, and pursue a European future.

Likewise, Yanukovych talked about Ukrainian identity within the diversity of European identities when he emphasized the closeness of Ukrainian identity with those of Central European countries, "which differ [from each other] in their special cultural heritage, traditions, and mentality and are close to the corresponding values of the Ukrainian people. The presence of common economic and political interests between these countries and Ukraine, which causes their natural rapprochement, should also be considered" (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 32). He did not distinguish between Ukrainians who live in the West or East of Ukraine, nor did he imply that Ukrainians were either Russians or Little Russians. On the contrary, coinciding with Yushchenko's views on this, he affirmed that "while strategic

partnership with Russia will provide Ukraine with a worthy place in the world community, this is not a manifestation of the "little brother" complex, this is the so-called realpolitik" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 124). He went further to say that "the *real* manifestation of the inferiority complex is the constant demands on Brussels to recognize us as Europeans" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 125). Thus, both Yushchenko and Yanukovych rejected the idea of Ukrainians being either Little Russians or Little Europeans, but rather just Europeans as any others self-identified as such nations.

Both presidents seemed to share a clear understanding that Ukraine's identity was a part of a larger European identity. In fact, this understanding was not questioned either in the popular or elite narratives. However, it came hand in hand with the notion that, due to the decades of colonization, Ukraine's European identity has been wiped out and replaced. There was a very clear message from both the novelists and Yushchenko to go back and rediscover European roots. What they both have in common was the desire for people to leave the Soviet or Russian legacy behind and re-read, rethink, and rediscover their Ukrainian identity as a part of a bigger European family. The novelists did not question Ukraine's Europeanness but grieved that it had been lost to a certain degree. Ukrainians did not need "European transformation" or to take on an identity different from what people already were; instead, they required self-transformation through self-rediscovery, as in their understanding of Ukraine as European. This process was not imposed from outside of Ukraine, but was rather a journey of self-realization and empowerment. To reconcile Ukrainians' inferiority complex with Ukraine's self-identification as European, it is possible to say that as Russia saw Ukrainians as Little Russians, Ukrainians saw themselves as Little Europeans, and both Yushchenko and Yanukovych wanted them to get rid of the qualifier "Little" and embrace the fullness of their Europeanness just like the rest of Europeans do.

Narrative 2: *Ukrainian's Unity in Diversity*

> We are a great modern world nation. We need a contemporary strategy for cultural revival and unity in the country. Its meaning is pro-Ukrainian, pro-European, and certainly respectful of the needs of each representative of individual national communities and minorities. Ukraine has a powerful resource of national unity.
>
> *Excerpt from To the Nation (Yushchenko 2010b, p. 34)*

It was not lost on Yushchenko that Ukraine was not ethnically and culturally homogenous. Therefore, the state had to pursue unifying policies to create an inclusive space for all Ukrainian citizens. He saw Ukraine's colonial past that imposed culture wars within Ukrainian society, and the re-stirring of them during Kuchma's second term, used on the voters as the two main challenges to the nation's unity. Both significant disturbance factors aligned with the popular narrative of *reality vs. imposition* and desire to decolonize.

Yanukovych also acknowledged the diverse makeup of Ukraine and was confident that this was by no means a threat to domestic unity when he said, "[w]e are different in origin and cultural environment in which we grew up. We speak different languages, that is why our Motherland is multiethnic, whether someone likes it or not. Is this her weakness? No - this is her strength" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 192). While recognizing the differences, neither President believed they constituted any meaningful, divisive clusters within Ukrainian society, nor contributed to any contradictory, irreconcilable outcomes.

Inherited and imposed culture wars

> For centuries, foreign elites imposed various principles and foundations of life organization on Ukraine and its regions. We entered the phase of independence with different goals and views formed based on regional, cultural, ideological, religious, and linguistic dividing lines. We met independence fragmented into often hostile segments. Such a legacy carries a potential danger of social conflicts and tensions. The disunity of society into alienated groups - by the level of self-awareness, religious confessions, political views, and social orientations - is one of the factors seriously hindering its consolidation. This, in turn, creates an opportunity for political manipulation of public consciousness and increases political apathy and mistrust of the authorities.
>
> *Excerpt from I Believe in Ukraine (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 74)*

When Yushchenko became President in 2004, he asked himself, "How was it possible to establish the idea of national solidarity over inherited age-old problems—metastases of old imperial divisions based on language, church, memory, heroes... in the end, divisions into West and East"[77] (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 373). He did not deny the fact that Ukraine was and had been ethnically and culturally diverse, and he did not qualify diversity as something negative. He did not oppose diversity, but rather the divisions imposed by and inherited from a Ukraine which was a part of the Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union. The former colonial elites instrumentalized the diversity of languages, faiths, and histories to foster divisions and prevent the consolidation of civic movements. He reflected on the diversity of Ukraine's societal fabric and concludes, "Ukrainians are very diverse. We have different religions, languages, historical memories, and, to some extent, cultures—that's true. We are different not because we are bad people. We are diverse because for 350 years we were kept in the circumstances of statelessness and underwent various experiments on our national characteristics" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 477). Here, Yushchenko connected the colonial past, denial of statehood, the erosion of the indigenous population and its culture via Russification, and forced resettlement of various peoples during the Soviet times, to the issues Ukraine faced in the years since regaining independence (Yushchenko, 2014, pp. 205, 499). The inherited, real, and perceived divisions still affected various groups that made up Ukraine's society.

Yanukovych, while having the same perspective as Yushchenko as to "different but united" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 191), did not assign the blame for the existing internal differences to Ukraine's colonial past, nor openly condemn the Soviet regime as culturally and politically oppressive. Instead, he was consistent in his pragmatic appeals to leave the past in the past and look forward, as "the future of Ukraine needs the unification of efforts of

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[77] Here, it implies the East and West of Ukraine.

its regions, the leaders of their political elites. Without it, it will never take place as a modern European state" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 4). Yanukovych's desire to leave the past in the past can be illustrated by how he presented himself as capable of moving past failures and losses that came with the Orange Revolution when he said:

> For many years to come, we will mentally return to that difficult time of the end of 2004, a time that changed us and which, despite everything, left our moral values unchanged, those values that have always formed the basis of our lives. I would very much like that every time, mentally returning to the "orange" and "blue-white"[78] days of our history, we would feel how we are getting closer and closer in our convictions and sympathies to the common, so to speak, political color, the color of our state flag. So that we would realize how we are *becoming* more and more closely-knit, united, convinced statesmen and a strong and united people of independent Ukraine (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 38).

Yanukovych connected the idea of *becoming* united to the allegiance to the Ukrainian state, which was civic in nature and overcoming differences to reach the common. Yushchenko also used the language of colors when he said, "our common choice is the colors of the Ukrainian flag; it unites all of us who live in the east, west, north and south" (Yushchenko, 2005, p. 94).

As mentioned earlier in this Chapter, Yanukovych placed the responsibility for creating unity among Ukrainians on the elites, when he said that "in no case should the authorities be allowed to divide people according to any criteria" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 44). When Yanukovych became Prime Minister in 2006, having won the parliamentary election after the defeat in 2004, he with Yushchenko as President signed the Declaration of National Unity, which exemplified the elites taking both responsibility and steps towards fostering unity among themselves and people of Ukraine. Yanukovych emphasized the role the public played in this, as "there was unity among the Ukrainian people, and unity among politicians began" (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 87). His perception was that while he lost people's hearts in 2004, in two years since then, Ukrainian society got more consolidated, and he felt

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[78] Orange was the color of Yushchenko's campaign, and blue-white was the color of Yanukovych's.

responsible to respond by putting differences aside to ensure further unification among the people.

The core divergence between the Presidents' narratives lies in whether Ukraine's unity should be rooted in historical reckoning or pragmatic cooperation. Yushchenko emphasized the need to confront and heal divisions imposed by a colonial past, seeing unity as a process of rediscovering a shared identity. In contrast, yet not in a contradictory way, Yanukovych prioritized moving beyond history, advocating for a civic unity built through elite-driven political collaboration.

Ukrainische Frage[79] as a response to Ukraine's diversity

Yushchenko's worldview principles mattered significantly in this sub-theme of unifying diversity; for him, "the world is not divided into white and black." He was confident that "if we are honest, intelligent people, nothing can divide us - not language, history, culture, someone's ambitions, not a religion" (Yushchenko, 2005, p. 121). Here, he again called for a civic construction of a national identity for Ukraine. In 2007, he addressed the nation and said, "We are one nation. This is a constant. Problems cannot be ignored. We do not take wishful thinking for granted. However, the historical truth penetrates deeper and deeper into life – while our political views may differ, the political nation and the state are common to all" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 32). His certainty was in the overwhelming majority of people voting for independence in 1991, as "[t]he myth of Ukraine's disunity was imposed on us as a fait accompli. Our differences were contrasted and exacerbated. But any regional features - imaginary and real - cannot deny the main thing. The independence of Ukraine is

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[79] When Yushchenko talked about the issue of unity or consolidating national unity in Ukraine, he often evoked and referred to Germany and Germany's struggle and challenges experienced during and after the Cold War, calling it the Ukrainian question (die deutsche Frage) or Ukrainian-Ukrainian reconciliation.

the result of the choice of the entire Ukrainian people" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 353). The unifying vote for independence gave Yushchenko hope for further fostering a more united and civic national identity for Ukraine.

Yushchenko also emphasized that Ukraine's imaginary and real regional features "are not antagonistic in nature. They are simply differences" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 7). He disapproved of the inherited approach of "us versus them and allies versus enemies" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 440). He invited Ukrainians to an open discussion and dialogue about the differences, and this is led by his example of trying to change the elites' culture while being the President, as he affirms cooperation with politicians of different political backgrounds. He said, "[t]he Party of Regions, socialists, communists, even if their ideas are not your ideas, are not your enemies, they are only your opponents. I will never get tired of repeating: all of them are also Ukraine" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 478). For Yushchenko, differences did not constitute division, polarization, or irreconcilability. The primary way out of the imposed myth of a divided Ukraine was through dialogue, as he said, "now that we have come together, we are not opposites, but we are just different. What needs to be done with a difference so that the potential for unity grows? We can start by saying we are one family with differences we can overcome. Only for this, we need time and dialogue" (Yushchenko, 2014, p.477). Such a gentle approach to eradicating contradictions through dialogue fit with the popular quest for their national identity, the narrative of social ambivalence, and the desire to eliminate the imposed culture wars.

In addition to time, another key requirement for Yushchenko to solve "the Ukrainian question" and achieve "reconciliation between all Ukrainians" was forgiveness. Several times, he used the example of how Ukrainians had forgiven Germans for WWII, and he called on Ukrainians to extend the same forgiveness to their fellow Ukrainians across the wall of imposed culture wars (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 502). Yushchenko tied this call for

forgiveness to his thoughts on the time needed to decolonize and his narrative on becoming *svidomi*, concluding, "Why is it so difficult to create a new national unity today? Because what a Pole has been working on for 150 years, we have to do it quickly. We need to understand that we are a nation. And national consciousness is not born in a day, and you won't do that homework in 5 years, and ten years is not enough!" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 505). Yushchenko's call for forgiveness underlined the importance of overcoming imposed divisions for national unity. He recognized the challenge of quickly building a cohesive national identity, noting that while other European nations have had centuries, Ukraine must achieve this rapidly. True reconciliation required time and a collective effort to forgive, and redefine Ukrainian identity from a complex, divided, colonial past.

Yanukovych did not delve into Ukraine's colonial past, and operated based on what he saw contemporary Ukraine was and how to make it work. He was confident that Ukraine could and would make it as an independent state and united nation if it federalized to ensure that all regions could preserve what they already had. He believed that "[o]nly strong and self-sufficient regions can ensure unity and diversity. We know this is strength. Our motto is regions of Ukraine—unity of equal and strong" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 212). Yanukovych claimed that his idea for federalization took roots in his perception of Europe, as "we understand that the ideas of regionalism, so popular in Europe now, will not bypass Ukraine. After all, we are following the path of integration into the European Union. The current united Europe is a region of regions where regional cooperation is very widely developed. And regional interests in the European Union are highly valued" (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 3-4). He thought that federalization would ensure that minority languages and faiths would be better protected if Ukraine followed the European example, and by adjusting its domestic policies, it would be easier for Ukraine to pursue its foreign policy goal of EU integration. He

counterargued that his vision for a federalized Ukraine had nothing to do with separatism or pursuing pro-Russian interests when he said

> I want to emphasize once again that the ideas of federalism that come from the mouths of our party members have nothing to do with separatism, encroachment on the integrity of Ukraine, or the inviolability of its borders. In this matter, we are even greater European integrators than those who accuse us of Eurasianism or tag us as Russia's "fifth column". After all, if our goal is a common European home, then a united Europe is, first of all, a Europe of regions (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 195).

Yanukovych presented himself as acting in the best interests of a united Ukraine with the objective of further integration into the EU. It is difficult to say whether he truly believed this or was deceiving or delusional, but this was his official narrative that people, mostly from the South and East of Ukraine, voted for.

Yushchenko and Yanukovych had different, yet not necessarily opposing, approaches to solving the issue of division and unity. For Yushchenko, unity could be achieved if Ukrainians were given more time to learn about the different histories of their nation and engage in a dialogue with each other, which would lead to a better understanding and forgiveness of real or imagined wrongdoings. For Yanukovych, who was unconcerned about the past, the answer was in the future federalization of Ukraine to accommodate the differences between regions. These two approaches differed in their perceptions of the reasons why Ukrainian society was so diverse and in their possible solutions, yet they both looked beyond the differences among the people, did not see them as irreconcilable, and pointed to the desire for a united Ukraine within the European family.

Narrative 3: *The Legacy and Ghost of Totalitarianism/Colonialism*

> I have many times witnessed discussions in which Ukrainian participants held views shaped by Soviet propaganda. It looks like two planets: the youth, who are aware[80] of what happened in 1932-1933, and the generation of Soviet people with basic attitudes from Stalin's "Short Course".[81] It is painful to watch as we Ukrainians, people of one family, have such a sad legacy from the communist regime. Ukrainians inherited this discord from the USSR.
> *Excerpt from Non-State Secrets (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 491)*

In contrast to early Kuchma, Yushchenko was concerned not only with the daunting legacy of the past but also with its ongoing influence on Ukrainians and possible, unwelcome return. If Kuchma mainly condemned the inherited structures and bureaucracy, Yushchenko added to this societal and mental damage still felt in the early 2000s. For him, the legacy of Ukraine's colonial experience went beyond the visible and material. It had corrupting implications for ideas, ideals, values, and consciousness, both of the people and of elites. However, he observed the ongoing process of some people becoming *svidomi* and noted,

> Ukraine today is at the turning point of eras. The period of stagnation is ending. A critical mass of people who want to see the country more democratic is forming in society. The problem of the current Ukrainian pseudo-elite is that, mentally, it belongs to the Soviet era and professes its values. To this day, Ukraine is led by typical representatives of the Soviet party, nomenklatura. Formed in a totalitarian system, they use authoritarian principles in governing the country at a genetic level (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 55).

This transformation and "outgrowing" the Soviet legacy aligned with the popular narratives of *people vs. elites* and *svidomi vs. not*. Here, Yushchenko criticized the elites' inertia in governing the state and hopes for the rising *svidomi* Ukrainians to bring changes to the nation from the ground up. Thus, Yushchenko's concern with the colonial legacy focused on Ukraine's past injustices, present context, and future challenges.

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[80] Svidomi

[81] History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course is, colloquially known as the Short Course, is the book commissioned by Stalin in 1935 and used as the most widely used propaganda text in secondary and higher education in the USSR.

Similarly, Yanukovych expressed his growing concern about the chance of totalitarianism making a comeback:

> new integration processes in the CIS carry the threat of moving in the reverse direction - the restoration of the principles of totalitarianism, not dismantling them, but, on the contrary, strengthening the existing mechanisms of corruption and shadowing, merging power and property, and preserving oligarchic structures (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 29).

While Ukraine was one of the founding states of the CIS, it never ratified its Charter and thus never was a full member. All presidents of Ukraine consistently kept a safe distance from the CIS as it was perceived as a platform for Russia to regain control over the CIS member states. Yanukovych was aware of the danger that lingering totalitarianism posed to Ukraine. At least Yanukovych knew that the public was concerned with corruption, government control and oligarchy, so he offered reassurance that he was on the same page regarding these issues.

Yushchenko grieved over the damage the Soviet and Russian colonialism did to Ukraine and Ukrainians, as he felt sorrow for the "crippled, broken nation that has lost its natural humanity" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 289). He evaluated the degree to which Ukrainians' consciousness was "psychologically raped" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 287). He concluded that even in early 2014, "the difference between today's Ukraine and Germany is that the trial and condemnation of Hitler's Nazism took place there. We had neither trial nor condemnation of communism" (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 495). While obviously, the past could not be changed, it was vital for the past to be evaluated, critically assessed, and judged. To achieve this, Yushchenko hoped that people and elites became *svidomi* enough to realize what the Soviet regime had done to them. During the Orange and Euromaidan revolutions, people in various cities across Ukraine took down the Lenin statues. Yushchenko welcomed this as Ukraine "got rid of a symbol that poisoned the Ukrainian body for decades [and] is a symbol of the Soviet occupation, starting from the January days of 1918!" (Yushchenko, 2014, pp. 478-479). The Parliament followed the people with official condemnation of Communist ideology and various decommunization bills from 2014 onwards, and in December 2015, the

Communist Party of Ukraine was finally banned. The decade between the two revolutions was a time of rethinking the past, evaluating core values, and restoring justice for and by the people of Ukraine.

Yanukovych, being pragmatic and wanting to move forward as he saw it, did not engage with the damage both the Russian and Soviet Empires brought to Ukraine. His focus was on the future,

> We support the continuation of work on the action plan adopted jointly by Ukraine and the European Union, and progress towards EU membership in the future, not in terms of the timing of accession, but in terms of achieving the Copenhagen criteria for accession to the European Union. However, we should not pursue this goal at the expense of our historical and cultural ties with Russia (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 227).

Yanukovych wanted Ukraine to join the EU when it was ready and not simply as a means of escaping its eastern neighbor. That is, his explicit motivation for integration with the EU was not framed antagonistically against Russia but rooted in Ukraine's domestic transformation and progress. Yet, his perspective on the "historical and cultural ties with Russia" lacked decolonial takes and rather seemed to serve as an attempt to appease Russia.

As of the early 2000s, in Yushchenko's perception, Ukraine was still dealing with the remnants of the past. He said that Ukraine, as a post-totalitarian state, had inherited "traditions and way of governing the country and the functioning of its state apparatus" and is challenged to "rebuild the barracks, which took 70 years to build, into a normal house in 18 years"(Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 41). Ukraine, as a post-colonial country, was prone to be "dependent on the former empire and serves it, despises its own state and does not support either it or its culture" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 41). As a post-genocide nation, Ukraine's intellectual elite had been damaged. The nation suffers from "distortion of worldview and own history and low national solidarity between different layers of the population" (Yushchenko, 2010b, p. 41). When viewed through this lens, it becomes easier to understand why both the public and elites in Ukraine struggled to implement timely reforms, remained

caught in post-Soviet inertia, and contributed to the image of a hesitant nation oscillating between the West and Russia.

Yushchenko developed more on the colonial legacy and its effect in the ways he still felt in his years in office. He said,

> Soviet conformism and the habit of living in a false world nurtured all the vices of today's post-Soviet society. There seems to be an answer to why we have so many vices. It is enough to look at the processes taking place in business, law enforcement, the judicial systems, and interpersonal relations—all this is a consequence of the anti-morality created by the communists (Yushchenko, 2014, pp. 70-71).

What previous research has labeled as "undemocratic," "corrupt," and "oligarchic," while being descriptively accurate, however, ignored the underlying reasons for that and traces of the Soviet legacy and colonial effects it had on Ukraine and its people. The task of transforming Ukraine, while both the elites and people were recovering from the nation's past and experiencing withdrawal symptoms, was enormous and required more time than was needed by other East European nations. In addition, Ukraine was also in danger of the ghost of colonialism wanting to make a comeback.

Yushchenko's worry about the Empire striking back was not paranoia and went alongside the same worry some novelists had in both decades. In his early days as President, Yushchenko asked,

> Does the Russian elite perceive Ukraine as an independent state? Have they decided on this issue? It is about the factual and not the legal side of the case. I understand how psychologically difficult it can be for Russian politicians, among whom some are still upset about the secession of Finland, even though 86 years have passed (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 80).

He went on to say that he believed that the Russian elite did recognize Ukraine as a sovereign state. He did so in his attempt to build "strategic partnership not just of the presidents of the states, but also of the peoples." This hope for a new foundation between Russia and Ukraine shattered as he understood Putin's worldview better. In conversations with his Russian counterpart, Yushchenko tried to communicate that each nation had its own history, memory, and heroes. Putin was convinced that Ukrainians and Russians had a shared history, which

was not what Yushchenko believed to be true (Yushchenko, 2014, pp. 481-483). Putin's arguments surprised and puzzled Yushchenko, as he pondered why Russia was unable to embrace a Christian approach to reconciliation through repentance. For Yushchenko, the Polish-Ukrainian dialogue demonstrated that democracies tend to reach understanding more easily, while reconciliation between a democracy and an empire was far more difficult (Yushchenko, 2014, p. 487). For him, just as people who go to the same school and have different biographies, it was when "we lived in the same Empire, but that did not mean that its history equaled ours. The very fact of existence under the common roof of the USSR in no way meant that the Ukrainian nation ceased to exist. Each nation has its own heroes" (Yushchenko, 2014, pp. 482-484). It seems like Yushchenko's attempts to get the Ukrainian people to rediscover their history signaled danger to Putin.

Yanukovych was less critical of Russia and was under the impression that Russia recognized Ukraine's sovereignty and agency when he said, "I absolutely do not share these fears. Firstly, relations with Russia are key for us. Secondly, Russia knows that Ukraine is a free state. Kyiv makes decisions on international affairs itself" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 139). Such a position differed from Yushchenko's views and the popular narratives reconstructed in earlier Chapters. While this represents a noticeable divergence between popular and elite narratives, its significance was limited for the general public. These issues arguably fall into the realm of *reality vs. imposition*, where many Ukrainians were reluctant to be drawn into culture wars within their own country let alone in relation to Russia.

Narrative 4: *Wayfinding Toward European Integration*

> Moreover, by and large, we have nothing to argue about. After all, it is in the sphere of foreign policy that we have a common vision - the European choice as Ukraine's key foreign policy priority. Everyone also understands the importance of developing a strategic partnership with the United States and a special partnership with NATO. And I have not yet met politicians who would oppose friendly relations with Russia. I believe that we have practically no disagreements with the President of Ukraine regarding the strategic prospects of our state for the next 20-25 years.
> The differences are only in tactics.
> *Excerpt from And a Year in Power (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 46)*

A lot has been written on Ukrainian elite narratives regarding Ukraine's foreign policy. While some (White and Feklyunina, 2014) provided a more nuanced, dynamic picture of what Yushchenko and Yanukovych envisioned for Ukraine's international future, most opted for more simple binary descriptions (Korostelina, 2013). There is no need to repeat what has been written about Ukraine's elite narratives on foreign policy from 2004 to 2014. However, I would like to contextualize Yushchenko and Yanukovych's narratives about foreign policy further and highlight their complementary thoughts on Ukraine's integration into the EU.

Most importantly, for both Yushchenko and Yanukovych, Ukraine's European integration was not in the context of European integration versus "historical ties" with Russia. Considering the popular narratives discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, as well as the continuities of Kuchma's and his successors' narratives and their further evolution, pre-2014 Ukraine's elites saw foreign policy direction not as a Sophie's choice, nor as an either-or situation (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 81; Yushchenko, 2005, p. 126; Yanukovych, 2004, p. 26; Yanukovych, 2007, p. 46). For Ukrainian elites, foreign policy was less a question of what direction to take or where to align, and more a matter of when and how to act.

From my interpretation of the elite narratives, the question 'either Russia or Europe' is irresponsible, as Russia was an important economic partner and immediate neighbor to

Ukraine, and thus Ukraine could not ignore it while making its way toward Europe. As discussed in Chapter 4 and earlier in this chapter, the EU has always been the only foreign policy direction for Ukraine's elite. It might not have always been a priority all the time. However, it was the only viable foreign policy vector that all Ukrainian presidents and governments subscribed to and promised to deliver to the Ukrainian people. Ukraine's accession to the EU was a question of timing and approach, rather than of intent.

Yushchenko was highly optimistic in his dreams of Ukraine signing the AA deal with the EU in 2009 (Radio Svododa, 2008). Despite his cautiousness and pragmatism toward Russia, it was under Yanukovych that Ukraine was finally ready and offered to sign the deal. Yanukovych urged the Ukrainian elite to "be restrained in proclaiming slogans and be predictable in actions. With such a policy, the issue of Ukraine's real accession to the European Union will be on the agenda of the negotiation process between Kyiv and Brussels when both sides are ready for it" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 126). It was also Yanukovych who postponed the AA deal in November 2013,[82] thus proving to be unpredictable in his actions.

Regardless, neither Yushchenko nor Yanukovych could be clearer that the end goal of Ukraine's foreign policy was becoming an EU member state. Yanukovych believed that Ukraine could be a member of both the EU and the Customs Union, despite this being unlikely. However, he presented it to the Ukrainian public as a possible option, not at the expense of Ukraine's European aspirations (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 193). Similarly, Yushchenko favored Ukraine joining the Russia-led Single Economic Space, provided that it did not "hurt Ukraine's integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures" (Yushchenko, 2004, p. 57). However, both Yushchenko and Yanukovych consistently emphasized the importance of mutually beneficial and respectful relations with Russia.

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[82] There will be more on this in the next chapter. The main focus here is on the foreign policy narratives rather than on foreign policy itself.

Yanukovych further justified his wayfinding toward the EU when he said that "Ukraine and Russia look in the same direction—toward European civilization and culture. Our countries have long been an integral part of this world. We are equally committed to the ideals of democracy, the market, and individual freedom—and we are convinced that these ideals can and must be upheld together!" (Yanukovych, 2005, p. 214). He seemed overly optimistic and under the impression that Russia was moving in the same direction as Ukraine; thus, there should not be any tensions between their foreign policies. It can be argued that Yanukovych believed Russia and Ukraine shared a common European cultural space—one that did not necessarily require institutional integration into the EU. In his narrative, Russia was portrayed as "equally committed to the ideals of democracy, the market, and individual freedom." From this perspective, Ukraine's pursuit of EU membership and its desire to maintain close ties with Russia were not seen as mutually exclusive. Whether he believed this or not, this was how Yanukovych framed his wayfinding for Ukraine's European integration. In terms of timeframe for EU accession, Yanukovych presented himself as more reasonable than Yushchenko, and while affirming the "strategic goal of joining the EU but [does] not set specific deadlines for this decision" (Yanukovych, 2006, p. 31), he still hoped that "during [his] tenure as Prime Minister, [Ukraine] will come very close to starting negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the European Union" (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 47).

Another striking similarity of Yushchenko and Yanukovych's wayfinding toward Europe was in their shared understanding that for Ukraine to achieve its foreign policy objective of joining the EU, Ukraine must commit to and deliver domestic transformative reforms and "build Europe in Ukraine" (Yushchenko 2004, p. 79; Yanukovych, p. 20). Yushchenko talked about the need for Ukraine to "remain committed to the principles of democracy, build a civil society, and ultimately raise the social and economic standards of living for citizens" (Yushchenko 2004, p. 79). Yanukovych complemented this with his

ambitious promises to launch "comprehensive structural reforms that will elevate the country to the level of competitive states, improve Ukrainians' quality of life to European standards, and make Ukraine a reliable partner" (Yanukovych, p. 86). Both Presidents highlighted that the domestic leads to the international, and the international is achieved through the domestic, not vice versa. Thus, in their view, Ukraine's foreign policy was not reactive to external pressures but rather was dictated by Ukraine's domestic needs.

As for the manner of European integration, both Yushchenko and Yanukovych rhetorically were on the same page when they insisted on an EU membership referendum (Yushchenko p. 207; Yanukovych p. 29) when the time comes. Regarding NATO, Yushchenko was crystal clear that Ukraine should join it (Yushchenko, 2010b, pp. 198, 460). Yanukovych changed his position over time from supporting the idea of joining NATO (Yanukovych, 2004, p. 22) to making Ukraine a neutral state in 2010 and insisting on a NATO referendum when and if the time comes (Yanukovych, 2006, pp. 10, 62). Despite the two Presidents' 'fully aligned' positions on EU integration, as Yanukovych had put it (Yanukovych, 2008, p. 98), the main issue that both Presidents noted was Ukrainians' awareness about NATO. As Yushchenko noted, "only 2% of Ukraine's population is informed about the nature and objectives of NATO" (Yushchenko, 2005, p. 107). Yanukovych admitted that due to "persistent Cold War stereotypes" (Yanukovych, 2007, p. 46), there was low NATO support among Ukrainians. However, he claimed that his government was "taking concrete steps to inform the public about NATO and Ukraine's interests in cooperating with the Alliance" (Yanukovych,2006, p. 69). This shared understanding of the need to both inform the Ukrainian public better about NATO and hold referendums for Ukraine's membership in either the EU or NATO shows that the Ukrainian elite was consistent in their narratives and aspirations about Ukraine's foreign policy.

Conclusion

Both Yushchenko and Yanukovych framed Ukraine's national identity as inherently European and argued that Ukraine always belonged in Europe, either through history or values, and therefore Ukraine eventually should join the EU. The process of becoming *svidomi* was directly tied to Ukraine's European trajectory, thus making European integration not just a foreign policy goal but rather a continuation of Ukraine's national self-rediscovery. Both Yushchenko and Yanukovych advocated for a unified national identity that did not require ethnic or linguistic homogeneity but rather was based on shared civic values. Yushchenko saw decolonization as necessary for Ukraine's full national identity to emerge. Athough Yanukovych did not explicitly use decolonial language, he still acknowledged the negative impact of oligarchy and corruption, which he characterized as remnants of the Soviet system and post-Soviet inertia. Both leaders agreed that Ukraine's European integration was as much about breaking from Soviet-era governance structures as it was about adopting Western values and institutions. Narratives of both Yushchenko and Yanukovych rejected the idea that Ukraine must choose between Europe and Russia and instead insisted that Ukraine's way to the EU was a matter of time and manner.

As for Ukraine's foreign policy of that time, considering the above-mentioned narratives and their interplay, I argue the following: EU integration was a consistent foreign policy objective, albeit not always an immediate priority. Cooperation with Russia should not have been seen as "multi-vector" or balancing, but rather as Ukraine's (somewhat failed) efforts to establish mutually beneficial relations with a neighboring state. The EU also saw Russia as an important partner, and thus Ukraine's foreign policy toward Russia should not have been interpreted any differently from those of any EU member state; Ukraine's European integration was driven by Ukraine's domestic desire to transform as a state and self-rediscover as a nation.

In the next Chapter, I look closer at the dynamics of Ukraine's domestic political landscape between 2004 and 2014, provide insights into the interplay of popular and elite narratives, and offer my reinterpretation on Ukraine's foreign policy of that time in the light of the narratives' interplay.

Chapter 7. The Interplay of Popular and Elite Narratives in Shaping Ukraine's Foreign Policy, 2004-2014

The Decade of Transformation and Identity Quest

Ukraine's foreign policy up to 2014 had been seen as swinging between pro-Western and pro-Russian stances or setting two feet on two boats. Some called it multi-vector diplomacy (Kropatcheva, 2011; Shyrokykh, 2018; D'Anieri, 2019), others balancing between Russia and the West (Proedrou, 2010; Gnedina, 2015) or bandwagoning with Russia as the perceived adversary (Smith 2016). In this final chapter, I challenge all these labels and existing scholarly narratives and advocate for a new interpretation of Ukraine's foreign policy before the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. These established misconstructions of Ukraine's foreign policy of that time stem not only from various traditional frameworks of the Realism persuasion (Mearsheimer, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2022) but also from oversimplified assumptions about Ukraine's national identity and its role in informing the state's foreign policy (Sakwa, 2014; Korostelina, 2013; Kuzio, 2015; Samokhvalov, 2015). The Realist scholars, being occupied with great power games, ignored Ukraine's agency and Ukrainians' sovereignty in pursuing their own foreign policy and later blamed the West and Ukraine for triggering the full-scale war in 2022, thus siding with Russia's narratives on justifying its invasion (Mearsheimer, 2014; Sakwa, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2022). The others, while looking past simple realpolitik, did not look beyond the perceived binary divide of Ukraine and overemphasized criteria of Ukraine's national identity this research has found to be meaningless. This led to the misunderstanding of Ukraine's national identity as deeply divided into "Eastern" and "Western" Ukraine, and subsequent misjudgment of preferred foreign policy, both in Western and Ukrainian scholarship (Proedrou, 2010; Korostelina, 2013; Kropatcheva, 2011). There were some exceptions, such as (White, McAllister, and

Feklyunina 2010; Fomina, 2014; White and Feklyunina, 2014), that primarily focused the Ukrainian elite narratives.

The previous chapters have examined the nuances and complexities of Ukraine's national identity that overcame the ostensible binary divide. I found that despite being outwardly different by language, ethnicity, religion, and even historical memories, the reconstructed narratives from my data suggested that Ukrainians, both the public and elites, had much more in common in terms of their vision of Ukraine's national identity and preference for EU integration. My analysis suggested that Ukrainians regarded the existing yet overstated differences as i) meaningless and not constituting national division or suggesting a "balancing" foreign policy; and ii) the cultural, linguistic, and regional differences were seen as diversity rather than division.

Most approaches of the previous research on pre-2014 Ukraine, did not take into account Ukraine's public identity narratives and domestic drivers and reduced Ukraine's foreign policy to reactive balancing. Based on the previous chapters' findings, in this chapter, I argue that Ukraine's foreign policy during from 2004 until 2014 should be understood not as reactive or dictated by external powers but as a domestically driven, pragmatic and introspective wayfinding shaped by evolving, competing, and completing narratives of identity and foreign policy. Thus, I look at Ukraine's foreign policy through the lens of the interplay of the reconstructed popular and elite narratives around Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy. This reinterpretation focuses on how foreign policy reflects a deeper societal conversation about identity, sovereignty, and aspirations, providing a fresh perspective on Ukraine's European integration as a consistent foreign policy that took root long before the Russian aggression cemented this trajectory and accelerated this process.

While previous frameworks focused on either Ukraine's geopolitical location between two great powers or the ostensible domestic binary divide, my approach centered Ukraine's

domestic narratives about its own national identity and aspired future within the European family, revealing a nuanced interplay of identity and foreign policy.

I propose that this decade should be seen as a period of pragmatic and introspective wayfinding, a process shaped by both practical needs and decolonizing aspirations rather than a simple East-West balancing act or binary divide-driven foreign policy of a deeply divided nation. Conceptualizing Ukraine's foreign policy as wayfinding transcends traditionally accepted binaries such as East vs. West balancing and pro-Russian vs. pro-European identities and highlights the processual nature of both Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy. As I operationalized the concept of identity as a process[83], I argue that it is conceivable to look at and reinterpret foreign policy as a processual phenomenon as well. Ukraine's national identity at the time was marked by inertia, a sense of inferiority, and ambivalence toward its ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, it was also shaped by internal tensions—both among ordinary citizens around the degree of being *svidomi* and between the public and political elites. These dynamics extended to Ukraine's relationship with the wider world, which was similarly marked by uncertainty and contradiction. At the same time, Ukraine's national identity reflected a broader trajectory of moving away from the colonial past toward a European future, gradually becoming a space for exploration, dialogue, and redefinition. In turn, Ukraine's foreign policy during this period can also be characterized by similar attributes.

Furthermore, despite being haphazard and hesitant, this wayfinding has always been consistently EU-integration-oriented and driven by both public and elite narratives on national identity rather than geopolitical rationality or financial gains alone. These narratives are important for understanding Ukraine's European choice, as they illustrate that Ukraine's

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[83] I discussed this in Chapter 3.

foreign policy was not reactive to external pressure from either Russia or the EU but rather a introspective response to internal identity narratives' interplay and decolonizing aspirations.

I begin this chapter by contextualizing the political landscape in Ukraine during this decade by overviewing key events and turning points. Next, I reinterpret Ukraine's foreign policy through the lenses of previously discussed popular and elite narratives. Then, I reflect on the interplay of the narratives and discuss what it means in terms of foreign policy implications and characteristics. Finally, I contemplate the importance of decolonizing research and the implications for understanding Ukraine's foreign policy.

Ukraine's Tale of Two Viktors: Key Events and Turning Points

The decade between the Orange Revolution in 2004 and Revolution of Dignity in 2014 that shaped most of Ukraine's recent history was often discussed as a decade of instability in the nation's domestic politics and international relations. It is a fair observation because Ukraine had two revolutions in 10 years, three snap elections, and did not follow through with signing the EUAA. Yet, it is still an unfair judgment because it oversimplified complex events, overlooked the country's resilience and progress, and failed to acknowledge the deeper implications of these turning points for Ukraine and its people. The decade's political turmoil, reform attempts, and identity struggles exacerbated Ukraine's messy image abroad and encouraged Western and Ukrainian academic discourses of domestic political polarization and European integration vs. Russian influence.

These reflections, while intuitive, still fall short of providing a bigger and deeper picture of the whys and hows behind the scenes of Ukrainian society and its interactions with the government. During this decade, Ukrainian society was perceived through the binary lens of switching back and forth between "forward-thinking," "pro-democratic," and "pro-European" ideas primarily held in the West of Ukraine and "old-school," "Soviet-nostalgic,"

"pro-Russian" ideas mainly associated with the East of the country. "Old-school"
Yanukovych lost to "forward-thinking" Yushchenko in 2004, who later only secured 5.55%
of votes in presidential elections in 2010. Then "pro-democratic" Yulia Tymoshenko lost to
"Soviet-nostalgic" Yanukovych in the 2010 run-off; the same "pro-Russian" Yanukovych
was impeached in 2014. Every time the domestic pendulum swung the voting maps West or
East, Ukrainian society appeared unstable, inconsistent, and insecure, and similar
(mis)implications were made regarding Ukraine's foreign policy. The following outline of
events goes beyond such a binary lens and contextualizes the events and turning points of
Ukraine's political landscape between 2004 and 2014. The focus is on evolving
commonalities and navigational trajectories as the driving forces shaping this transformative
period rather than on inherent polarized differences and stagnant stand-offs of Ukrainian
society and elites.

The Orange Revolution and Yushchenko's Rise

The Orange Revolution of 2004 gave Viktor Yushchenko five years as President and
hope for progress and reforms for Ukrainians. Not everyone was on his side, including those
who stood next to him at the Maidan Square and later were invited to his government. Yet, it
was a key moment of vast unity among Yushchenko's supporters and those who voted
differently. Apart from the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians that had gathered at the
Independence Square in Kyiv, there were many other "Orange Maidans" held not only in the
West of Ukraine but also in such eastern cities as Poltava, Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Dnipro
(Ukrainska Pravda, 2004). Among the reasons for the Orange Revolution of 2004, the
Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (2024, p. 8) named "the lack of a clear policy aimed
at eliminating economic, political and mental dependence on Russia" alongside all other
reasons that were constructed around Ukraine's domestic issues such as corruption and

growing authoritarianism under Kuchma. While the public was indeed concerned with Ukraine's foreign policy to some degree, it was the domestic chaos and dissatisfaction with the elites and their inert "Soviet" ways that triggered and centered the core drivers for the revolution.

It is interesting to note the mottos used during the Orange Revolution as they can enrich the understanding of collective identities, emotions, and the public's assertions expressed in protests (Van de Velde, 2022). The most popular slogans included "Together we are many, we cannot be defeated!", "The police are with the people!", "Freedom cannot be stopped!", "Kuchma out!", and "East and West together!". The first and the last ones are of particular interest. Anatoly Bondarenko, who in 2004 worked as a programmer on the TV channel "1+1", one of the leading Ukrainian channels, became an activist during Kuchmagate in 2000[84]. He created the slogan "Together we are many, we cannot be defeated!" in 2002, following his research on the experience of nonviolent revolutions in different countries (Ukrainska Pravda, 2005a). This motto was a paraphrased translation of the verse from the Chilean protest song *El pueblo unido jamás será vencido*.[85] During the Orange Revolution, the Ukrainian hip-hop band GreenJolly wrote a song based on this motto, later becoming one of the revolution's unofficial anthems and Ukraine's 2005 Eurovision entry (Eurovisionworld, 2005). The stanza '*Together we are many*' was repeated in eight languages: Ukrainian, Polish, German, Spanish, Czech, French, English, and Russian. While it is not unusual for Eurovision to have bilingual songs, this was still significant as it signaled to the much wider outside world how serious Ukrainians were about being united against the elites and their corruption, falsifications, machinations, and divisive lies. The motto "East and West together!" is self-explanatory and explicitly affirmed that despite the elites' wishes to

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[84] Political scandal in Ukraine in November 2000, in which President Leonid Kuchma was recorded on tape allegedly ordering the earlier abduction of journalist Georgiy Gongadze.
[85] In English: The people united will never be defeated.

impose division by instigating culture wars, people did not subscribe to this narrative and did not see each other as their domestic ontological Other.

However, as the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory reported (2024, p. 15), within five years, Ukrainian think tank experts and journalists began highlighting the unfulfilled promises and incomplete goals of the Orange Revolution. They pointed to a deteriorating situation in state governance, marked by a loss of control over national processes by authorities and widespread irresponsibility among officials. Additionally, experts noted growing public disillusionment with democracy, a lack of faith in the ability to influence socio-political developments, and the growing instrumentalization of Ukraine's regional differences. Negative trends also included a rise in corruption and a worsening adherence to the rule of law.

Such observations align with the interplay of popular and elites' narratives of *people vs. elites, reality vs. imposition*, and dealing with *the legacy of Totalitarianism/Colonialism*. At the same time, despite this perceived failure to accomplish rather audacious goals and overpromised commitments made by Yushchenko, who enthusiastically hoped to enter negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the European Union by 2007 (Ukrainska Pravda, 2005b) and to sign an association agreement in 2009 (Radio Svoboda, 2008a), his efforts were not without impact. Small yet incremental changes in Ukrainian society's mentality and behavior took place during and since the events of the Orange Revolution.

Mobilization of various grass-root organizations, establishment and growth of civil society driven by the strong desire to get things done rather than just talk reforms and being fed up with the Soviet legacy of inertia and corruption could be seen on either side of the Dnipro River regardless of their political preferences. The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory acknowledged that the Orange Revolution played a significant role in fostering national consciousness, that is being *svidomi*, among Ukrainian citizens and advancing civil

society, positioning it as the primary force behind democratic transformations in the country. During this period, society came to appreciate values such as freedom of speech and political and civil liberties. Additionally, for the first time, the active part of Ukrainian society openly expressed its stance against Russia's attempts to influence Ukraine's internal affairs (Ukrainian Institute of National Memory Report, 2024, p. 16). These positive and negative developments reflected the interplay of the elites and popular narratives of *enthusiastic fatalism, audacious fearfulness, irreversible past, uncertain present*, *svidomi vs. not*, and *struggle for national identity*.

The Viktors Change: one down, one up

The 2010 presidential election made Viktor Yanukovych president. This gained attention from academics who had characterized Ukraine's domestic situation as a binary stand-off between the East and the West of the country as well as Ukraine's foreign policy as balancing between the collective West and Russia (Fean 2010; D'Anieri 2012; Kropatcheva 2014). Unsurprisingly, Yanukovych's marginal win to become Ukraine's head of state, responsible for the state's foreign policy vision, seemed to provide more ostensible evidence to support such an argument. However, the attention to Yanukovych's win and its perceived implications, especially for Ukraine's foreign policy preferences in 2010, were overemphasized for two main reasons. Firstly, foreign policy was practically absent from the election campaign as all previous election campaigns almost entirely focused on domestic issues. Secondly, the main development in Ukrainian domestic policy had happened not in 2010 but in 2006. Ukraine's parliamentary election in 2006 had got Yanukovych over 32% of the votes (BBC Ukrainian, 2006) and put his party into a position of power to negotiate a Parliament coalition agreement. This victory was important for Yanukovych in the long term as it not only secured him the presidency in technical terms but also legitimized him within

Yushchenko's presidency and Ukraine's political landscape. It is important to look at why this victory happened and how it was (mis)handled by Yushchenko.

Only 16 months after the Orange Revolution, during which Yanukovych had been accused of falsifying the election results and perceived as Kuchma's continuity, his party managed to triple their seats in the Parliament, which opened him doors to negotiate deals to become Prime Minister. For Ukrainians, Yushchenko, whose party only got under 15% of votes (BBC Ukrainian, 2006), became one of 'them' rather than 'us'. If in 2004, Yushchenko had been celebrated by many around the country, in less than a year and a half, the inner fights within his "Orange" team (RFE, 2008), alongside still leading Ukraine in post-Soviet inertia, made him very unpopular (Ukrainska Pravda, 2010). Considering the strong *people vs. elites* narrative that characterized public perceptions at the time, another interpretation is possible that would explain Yanukovych's party's victory in the elections as a protest vote. Ukrainians voted for Yanukovych not because his vision for Ukraine's future was better or more aligned with the people's self-perception but because people were still fed up with the elites and wanted to signal that to Yushchenko.

The perception that Yushchenko and Yanukovych both were a part of the same elite was further cemented when Yushchenko appointed Yanukovych Prime Minister after signing the Unity Memorandum in August 2006. This was signed by all political parties elected in 2006 except the bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko. President Yushchenko proposed it to help navigate the political differences among those elected. The Memorandum confirmed the "unchangeability and irreversibility of Ukraine's foreign policy course, that is integration into the European Union," stipulated "NATO accession based on the referendum results," and placed Ukraine's involvement in the Single Economic Space within the WTO framework (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2006). Yushchenko's and Yanukovych's public agreement on these issues resonated with the narratives of the ir*reversible past, European future, pragmatic*

pluralism, unity in diversity, and *path towards European integration.* While Yushchenko's desire to ensure a unified vision for government is palpable, I argue that with hindsight it brought more harm than good to Ukraine's political landscape.

Firstly, it legitimized Yanukovych and his party within Ukraine's political discourse. While Yushchenko did not have much choice but to propose Yanukovych as Prime Minister after the 2006 election, he did not have to concede to personal negotiations with parliamentary parties. He could have stayed out of it completely, as it was not one of the President's roles to be involved in creating a coalition in Parliament. Secondly, Yushchenko sent mixed signals to the public by cooperating with someone he fought so vigorously less than a year and a half ago, and by doing so, Yushchenko inadvertently confirmed the popular idea that all elites were the same, which in turn fueled further the narrative of *people vs. elites*. Thirdly, by officially and publicly agreeing with Yanukovych, Yushchenko might have appeared to move away from the narratives of *svidomi vs. not*, *reality vs. imposition*, and *the legacy and ghost of Totalitarianism/Colonialism*.

Due to the political stalemate between Yushchenko and Yanukovych, Yanukovych's government only lasted for over a year. Yushchenko had to call for another parliamentary election, which made Tymoshenko Prime Minister from 2007 to 2010. Yanukovych ran for President in 2010 as an opposition candidate. Yushchenko included Yanukovych in the pro-EU camp in 2006 and inadvertently offered him the opportunity and credibility to run for future election as yet another pro-Western candidate who was no different from others. As such, it was not surprising that Yanukovych won the election as Ukrainians tend to vote against whoever is in office[86] driven by the predominant narrative of *people vs. elites* and under the assumption that the foreign policies of the candidates did not differ.

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[86] The only exception is Kuchma's re-election in 1999.

The Euromaidan and Yanukovych's Fall

Under President Yanukovych, the ghost of Totalitarianism in Ukraine revived. Human rights, freedom of speech, corruption, and government accountability progressively worsened (Kudelia, 2014). While things were deteriorating domestically, there was no clear signal initially that Yanukovych would change Ukraine's foreign policy orientation, as the country was bound to move up in its European integration aspirations by signing the Association Agreement during the Vilnius summit in late November of 2013.

On the morning of November 21, the Parliament passed the first law on European integration with a whopping majority of 365 votes (Ukrainska Pravda, 2013a). Five hours later, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov U-turned on pro-EU foreign policy and ordered the government to "return to active dialogue with the Russian Federation and other countries of the Customs Union and CIS member states" (Ukrainska Pravda, 2013b). This sudden change was not expected or properly explained. For the first time, ever since the pro-European foreign policy choice of Ukraine's government had been made shortly after regaining independence in 1991, the elite publicly and decisively broke off from the narratives of *irreversible past, pragmatic pluralism, European future, legacy of Totalitarianism,* and *path towards European integration*. Later that same day, Yanukovych contradicted his own government and said there was no alternative to EU integration and that Ukraine had met "temporary difficulties" by taking a pause rather than a full stop to join the EU (BBC News Ukrainian, 2013a). Despite his last-ditch efforts to recover the narrative, Ukrainians started gathering at the Maidan on the evening of November 21, 2013. That same evening, residents of Lviv, Lutsk, Dnipro, Uzhhorod, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Vinnytsia took to the city squares in solidarity with the Kyiv Maidan. The next day, protest actions began in Kharkiv, Khmelnytskyi, Zhytomyr, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Rivne, Kirovohrad, Sumy, Luhansk, Chernivtsi,

Cherkasy, and Chernihiv (Ukrainian Institute of National Memory Report, 2024, p. 20). Like in 2004, Yanukovych again united people fed up with the lies of the elites.

The day before the Vilnius Summit, Yanukovych gave his biggest interview ever to five leading TV channels in Ukraine and assured the public that Ukraine's course to the West was unchanged, promising that Ukraine would get an association with the EU in 2014 and enter the European family as a strong player. He even said he "applauded those who came out to support European integration" (KP, 2013, p. 2). These reassurances did not work, as the protesters stayed in the main squares of cities around Ukraine. On November 29, Yanukovych returned from Vilnius without signing any deals with the EU under pressure from Russia not to do so (TSN, 2014). The peaceful protestors in Kyiv were joined by the Parliament's opposition leaders, declaring their intention to demand the dissolution of Parliament, the government's resignation and to force Viktor Yanukovych to sign the Association Agreement by March 15, 2014.

The peaceful protests of 2013 changed at dawn on November 30 in Kyiv. At around 4 a.m., members of the Berkut special forces unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs brutally beat several hundred people near the Independence Monument in the center of the capital. This provoked thousands more people to come to the streets and led to a series of confrontations between the public and the special forces. As the government escalated its crackdown, clashes between protesters and security forces intensified, leading to violent confrontations, and the deaths of activists. This situation went on for nearly three months. The mass killings of unarmed people in downtown Kyiv between 18th and 20th February 18 2014 were a turning point in the protests and led to the fall of the Yanukovych regime and the beginning of changes in the system of state governance.

From the events of this decade between two revolutions, it is fair to note that no matter who ran for election, victories were marginal on both sides, people grew more

disillusioned with the elites no matter what the president's name was, and the public became more ready to mobilize and stand up for their values and rights. Social psychologist Oleg Pokalchuk evaluated that "[t]he events of 2004 were not a revolution. This was a puberty period in Ukrainian society when there were many emotions and passions, and everything was bright and beautiful. A real revolution fundamentally changes the system, as with Euromaidan in all respects" (Ukrainska Pravda, 2024). Whereas the leading causes for the Orange Revolution were primarily framed around domestic issues of democracy, the causes for the Euromaidan were mainly centered around Ukrainians' vision for a pro-EU foreign policy, future within Europe, and irreversible departure from Russia's influence. The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (2023) listed 11 reasons for the Euromaidan revolution, nine of which were the public's dissatisfaction with Yanukovych and his regime regarding domestic policies, the decline of democratization, and growing authoritarianism. This is not a contradiction, because Ukrainians understood that their domestic situation was to reflect on their foreign policy aspirations of joining the EU. Sushko rightly argued soon after Yanukovych became President in 2010 that "in the longer run, the foreign and security policy of Ukraine will mainly depend on domestic developments: either an erosion of democracy and freedom and, unavoidably, a move toward Russia, or the stabilization and further development of democratic institutions and rule of law, leading to gradual integration with the West" (Sushko, 2010, p. 5). As the elites' inertia and regress from democratization threatened the narratives of *irreversible past* and *European future*, tensions rose to the point of no return for Yanukovych and his team. Foreign policy decisions during this period reflected attempts to respond to popular demands for democratic reforms and European integration. The failure of elites to align with public sentiment led to significant political upheavals, showing that domestic identity narratives directly influenced foreign policy.

Interplay of Popular and Elite Meta-Narratives on Identity in Ukraine's Foreign Policy

In the following section, I examine how popular narratives surrounding national identity are reflected in Ukraine's foreign policy from 2004 to 2014. It is important to emphasize that in this thesis, Ukraine's foreign policy is conceptualized as a processual response to the interplay of the nation's internal identity narratives and its decolonizing aspirations. It is also crucial to remember that the narratives identified and described in the previous chapters did not exist in a vacuum, isolated from one another; instead, they intertwined, interacted and complemented each other.

I will analyze clusters of paired popular and elite narratives to exemplify some of these narrative interplays. The first cluster consists of the popular narratives of *people vs. elites* and *svidomi vs. not*, paired with the elite narratives of *the legacy and ghost of totalitarianism/colonialism* and *wayfinding toward European integration*. The second cluster includes the popular narratives of *reality vs. imposition* and *Ukraine and its Others*, paired with the elite narratives of *the struggle for national identity* and *Ukrainians' unity in diversity*. This clustering illustrates the possible interplay between popular and elite narratives; the clusters can be rearranged, which may provide different insights on their interaction but will not significantly alter the overall impact.

The following subsections begin with a summary of the relevant narratives. Then, I analyze Ukraine's foreign policy developments during this period through the lens of these narrative interplays. Finally, I highlight the implications of these interactions for Ukraine's foreign policy at the time.

The narrative of *people vs. elites* was the most prominent of all the narratives for the decade between the revolutions. It showed growing societal dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the government regardless of which political party was in office. Corruption, the inertia of the elites inherited from the Soviet times, slow and inconsistent nation-building, disrespect for human rights, and lack of democratization and reforms were some of the main reasons that the public grew weary of the Ukrainian elite. The growing tension between the elites and people was shared by Ukrainian citizens regardless of their linguistic, ethnic, geographical, or religious background. This was not just 'regular' hate for or passive disappointment with the elected officials. The tension between the Ukrainian elites and the people at the time was a proactive and invoking dynamic that urged people to step up in 2004 to demand the rule of law when the government was deemed as unbecoming for what people thought democracy should be like. The divide between the elite and the people did not disappear after the Orange Revolution. Instead, it brewed more as the same dynamic mobilized Ukrainians once again in 2014 when the government made a complete turn from their promised foreign policy choices. As demonstrated from the reconstructed popular narratives in Chapter 5, the public's disillusionment with the Ukrainian elites shaped the pro-European sentiment as the EU was seen as a positive alternative to the domestic practices that reminded of the Soviet regime, resembled Russia's elites, and were felt due to the inertia of the Ukrainian elites as they failed to address the people's aspirations for democratic reforms.

The narrative of *svidomi vs. not* stemmed from and amplified the narrative of *people vs. elites*. It highlighted the emergence of the conscience level divide among Ukrainians of various backgrounds regardless of their locale or any other outward attribute such as language, religion, or ethnicity. Being *svidomi* signified self-awareness, cultural

consciousness, and active societal and political transformation engagement. Not *svidomi* suggested passivity, lack of self-awareness, and acceptance of the inherited status quo, often attributed to leftovers of Soviet influence and its inertia. Throughout the decade, *svidomi* Ukrainians urged not *svidomi* Ukrainians to awaken to their potential for change, contrasting the importance of self-identification with societal inertia. The rise of *svidomi* Ukrainians during the Orange Revolution significantly influenced Ukraine's preference for European integration, amplifying the shared narrative of *people vs. elites* as the awakened and engaged public challenged government actions that conflicted with their aspirations. This was evidenced by the response to Yanukovych's withdrawal from the EU Agreement in late 2013.

Closely connected to these narratives is the narrative of *the legacy and ghost of totalitarianism/colonialism*, which highlighted the lingering effects of Soviet and Russian colonialism on Ukraine's political and social landscape. It emphasized the contrasting approaches of the Ukrainian elite in addressing this legacy, which Ukrainians were becoming more *svidomi* of. Yushchenko acknowledged the deep psychological and institutional damage inflicted by the Soviet regime and advocated for a clean break from the past through decommunization and European integration. Yanukovych also expressed dissatisfaction with the inherited inertia. Both presidents saw Ukraine at a turning point, where a growing segment of society aspired to democratic values, yet the political elite remained entrenched in Soviet-era mentalities. Yanukovych promoted a more flexible foreign policy, seeking to maintain strategic ties with Russia while pursuing European integration, though his rhetoric downplayed the historical reasons for divisions within Ukrainian society. This narrative emphasized Ukraine's struggle to navigate its way between its Soviet past and European future, with inherited divisions and internal inertia shaping its path forward.

Complementing this was the narrative of *wayfinding toward European integration*, further elaborating on Ukraine's elites' visions for the country's path toward European

integration. It emphasized Ukraine's historical struggle for independence and democracy. Both Yushchenko and Yanukovych saw European integration juxtaposed with enduring ties to Russia and acknowledged the strategic importance of maintaining flexible relations with both the EU and Russia, rejecting an "either-or" approach. They emphasized the need for pragmatic policies prioritizing economic growth, political stability, and gradual adaptation to European standards while preserving mutually beneficial ties with Russia. Yushchenko's arguments for integration with the EU transcended economic reasons and were rooted in Ukraine's Europeanness. Yanukovych did not disagree but argued for taking a firm stand in dealing with Russia not from the position of "the younger brother" and with the EU, not from the position of "beggar." Ultimately, Ukraine's European integration was seen as an inevitable but long-term process requiring internal reforms, strategic patience, and a pragmatic diplomatic approach.

Together, these narratives reflected the ongoing struggle between the elites and the people, the awakening of national consciousness, and the lingering influence of its Soviet past. As the interplay of the popular and elites' narratives shaped Ukraine's political and societal landscape between the revolutions, it can serve as a lens to help better understand Ukraine's foreign policy of that time. This interplay emphasizes the complexities of Ukraine's path toward European integration, highlighting the challenges of reconciling the inherited past with aspirations for a democratic future.

Even though Ukraine's domestic issues primarily drove the Orange Revolution in 2004, this directly connected and impacted Ukraine's foreign policy. Firstly, it showed that the Ukrainian people desired democratization and rejected the authoritarian practices of the past when the run-off between Yushchenko and Yanukovych was proven to be falsified. The interplay of these two narratives was most prominent in its pro-active nature. The public's thirst for democratization and the rule of law that comes with democracy, as reflected in

public discourse and literary narratives, suggested that Ukrainians associated European integration with the prospect of political restoration of the Ukrainian state and greater civic freedoms for citizens. Peter Dickinson concluded in 2020 that,

> [t]he protests served as a national awakening, establishing Ukraine's democratic credentials and setting the country on a path that diverged sharply from the increasing authoritarianism of Vladimir Putin's Russia. In the sixteen years since the Orange Revolution, Ukraine has staged eight national votes without ever witnessing a return to the kind of political oppression and rampant vote-rigging that remains routine elsewhere in the former USSR. This success has helped strengthen notions of European identity among Ukrainians and deepened the sense of psychological separation from authoritarian Russia (Dickinson, 2020).

This fair assessment of the Orange Revolution's impact on Ukraine's elites and ordinary citizens is important. It was not just a moment of national awakening (becoming *svidomi*) but also cemented the democratic ways of doing politics associated with Europe rather than Russia, thus implying the public's preference for a pro-Western foreign policy. The Orange Revolution was driven by public dissatisfaction with the ruling elites' corrupt and authoritarian tendencies, reinforcing the narrative of the *people vs. elites* divide. The idea of the Orange Revolution as a "national awakening" aligns with the *svidomi vs. not* narrative.

Secondly and consequently from the first point above, the Orange Revolution and the public's thirst for democratic reforms and departure from the past framed the Ukrainian elites' maneuvers for the state's foreign policy as pro-European, at least in their rhetoric. The Razumkov Center's report on Ukraine's foreign policy in 2004 concluded that following the Orange Revolution, "Ukrainian society has shown its maturity and genuine Europeanness in thoughts and actions, has given the new authorities arguments in favor of Ukraine's European future" (Razumkov Center, 2004, p. 7). The following year's report found that a relative majority of Ukrainian citizens supported Ukraine's accession to the EU (Razumkov Center, 2005, p. 44). Using the narrative of *people vs. elites* as a lens to understand Ukraine's foreign policy driving force helps to emphasize how the public's perception of the EU as a symbol of transparency and governance contrasted with their experiences of domestic corruption and

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inefficiency. The revolution thus serves as evidence of how the public's disillusionment with domestic elites impacted Ukraine's foreign policy in a pro-European direction. Portraying the Orange Revolution as a moment of self-awakening suggests that the public, growing more *svidomi*, viewed European integration as a pathway to their future. In contrast, the elites were seen as inert to change through the lens of the *people vs. elites* divide, holding onto outdated practices and being reluctant or slow to commit to reforms fully. The Orange Revolution emerged as a crucial moment in Ukraine's pursuit of European integration, embodying the tension between *svidomi*, mobilized public, and hesitant elites still influenced by the authoritarian past. Thus, the interplay of these narratives provides a deeper understanding of how the revolution influenced Ukraine's foreign policy trajectory and societal transformation.

On February 21, 2005, one of the first steps of the new government on the European path was the adoption and subsequent implementation of the Ukraine-EU Action Plan for 2005-2007, which did not aim to prepare for EU membership but rather to expand and deepen cooperation in certain priority areas. In 2007, Razumkov evaluated the implementation of the Action Plan as ambiguously successful. The center's experts acknowledged that Ukraine made significant progress in areas related to democratization, such as upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms, ensuring media freedom, fostering interethnic harmony, and promoting civil society development. However, advancements in other critical areas—such as combating corruption, securing judicial independence, and improving socio-economic conditions—remained largely absent, with no substantial positive changes observed (Razumkov Center, 2007). Despite this evaluation, in March 2007, negotiations began on a new enhanced Ukraine-EU agreement, which would include establishing a free trade zone. Yushchenko said the deal was "more comprehensive than the one offered to Poland or the Baltic states a few years ago" (Obozrevatel, 2005). The adoption of the Ukraine-EU Action Plan in 2005 and the subsequent negotiations for a new EU agreement in 2007 reflected

Ukraine's pragmatic yet aspirational steps toward European integration. These efforts highlighted the tension between popular demands for reform and the lingering Soviet-era inertia that hindered progress, which emphasizes the elite narrative of European integration as both strategic and identity-driven, with Yushchenko positioning Ukraine's progress as evidence of its Europeanness despite the slow pace of reforms tied to its Soviet legacy.

In 2010, Ukraine joined the WTO, which some academics regarded as Yushchenko's single positive achievement in his foreign policy (Gretskiy, 2013). The same year, Russia launched its Customs Union. Before 2013, there had been little discussion about Ukraine joining the Russia-led Customs Union in Ukraine as the elites never seriously considered it. Any public discussion about this union was narrated in primarily negative terms. In 2010, Yanukovych called it impossible for Kyiv to join the Customs Union, explaining this by the obligations that Ukraine assumed after becoming a member of the WTO and the need to fulfill the conditions for creating a free trade zone with the EU. Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Serhiy Tigipko, economists from the pro-presidential camp, for example, Party of Regions MP Oleksiy Plotnikov, and former Finance Minister Viktor Pynzenyk all supported Yanukovych's position on not joining the Russian customs bloc and reaffirmed that the European Union market and integration into the European community was Ukraine's top foreign policy priority (BBC News Ukrainian, 2010).

The negative perception of the Customs Union among both the Ukrainian elites and ordinary citizens was significantly influenced by events in Belarus in 2011, where the country was compelled to devalue its currency by more than a third (BBC News Ukrainian, 2011). In September 2012, former First Deputy Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Volodymyr Ohryzko took it beyond economics to the realm of values and warned that "[i]f we join the Customs Union, we will very quickly turn into a colony of Russia, in just a couple of years. The Customs

Union is a prologue to a political union. They will first take control of the economy and then everything else" (LBNews, 2012). Ukraine's WTO accession represents a key milestone in decolonizing its economic policies, while Russia's push for the Customs Union illustrates the haunting ghost of Soviet-era dependency on Moscow and the challenge of wayfinding Ukraine's foreign policy.

In February 2013, Yanukovych demanded the government ensure the unconditional implementation of the agreements reached with the leadership of the European Council and the European Commission, as he said, "We must make every effort to sign the Association Agreement during the Eastern Partnership summit" (TSN, 2013). At the same time, he emphasized: "I am convinced that we should continue to actively search for a mutually acceptable model of cooperation with the Customs Union."

The following month, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov tabled the suggestion of an "acceptable model of cooperation," such as Ukraine joining the Customs Union as an observer, even though the Union did not have any provisions for such a model (Radio Svoboda, 2013a). Before this announcement, Dzerkalo Tyzhnia (citing a source in the government) reported that the "3+1"[87] formula proposed by the Ukrainian side was not considered, as the Russian side had previously rejected it, and as a result of consultations with the Russian side at the level of working groups, an agreement was reached on Ukraine's "associated membership" in the Union (Dzerkalo Tyzhnia, 2013). The Ukrainian government denied the associate membership format as Prime Minister Azarov reiterated that Ukraine was negotiating an observer status only (Ukrinform, 2013). Even though Russia had been insisting on Ukraine joining the Customs Union as a full member during the Astana summit in late May 2013, presidents of the membership countries agreed to grant Ukraine observer status (Radio Svoboda, 2013b). During a visit to Brussels, former Ukrainian Foreign Minister

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[87] This means the three members of the CU, Russia, Belarus, and Qazaqstan, plus Ukraine as an observer.

Leonid Kozhara stated that Ukraine would adhere to all Customs Union agreements that did

not conflict with its commitments to the EU. He further emphasized that Ukraine's goal was

not to integrate into Eurasian structures but rather to prevent disintegration in key sectors

critical to the country, such as aircraft manufacturing and the space industry (BBC News

Ukrainian, 2013b). This drew much media attention in Ukrainian society, which expressed

reservations about this move. Yanukovych's rejection of full Customs Union membership

aligned with the broader elite narrative of rejecting colonial dependency, as European

integration was framed not just as a geopolitical choice but as a necessity to ensure Ukraine's

sovereignty and economic stability.

Volodymyr Kurennoy MP, a member of the parliamentary committee on foreign

affairs, expressed his views on this development: "I do not understand what the Customs

Union is because it is not yet a fully known organization, from the point of view of

international law. On the other hand, any actions that will interfere with the implementation

of Ukraine's course towards European integration will be a coup d'état. We have a law 'On

the Principles of Foreign Policy,' which clearly and unambiguously states that the only

possible foreign policy is European integration" (Radio Svoboda, 2013b). Bohdan

Danylyshyn, Professor of the Vadym Hetman Kyiv National Economic University, said,

"Ukraine's observer status in itself means nothing to the Customs Union. We can observe; the

main thing is not to become a participant in the process" (Danylyshyn, 2013). An

international affairs expert, Oleksandr Paliy, critically reminded the public that

> [i]n the Customs Union, nothing is decided not only by the observer, but Qazaqstan
> and Belarus do not decide anything either. All decisions there are made by Russia and
> in the interests of Russia alone. Therefore, Ukraine has received only one thing: the
> opportunity to find out in a timely manner what next problem our strategic partners
> are preparing for Ukraine. These are all positives [of Ukraine joining the CU as an
> observer]. And the negatives are that things that will be written into those CU
> agreements theoretically could harm integration into the European Union (Radio
> Svoboda, 2013b).

Valentyn Nalyvaichenko, MP and former Head of the Security Service of Ukraine, listed nine arguments against Ukraine's participation in the Customs Union and concluded that for the Russian Federation, the institution represented virtually the last opportunity to secure a future for its producers. In contrast, he argued that Ukraine had multiple opportunities to realize its national economic potential, such as within the European Union, the possibility of free trade with Russia, and the continuation of strategic relations with Belarus, Qazaqstan, and other countries (Radio Svoboda, 2013c). Former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and Deputy Director General of the Razumkov Center Valeriy Chaly suggested first signing the EU Association Agreement and then talking about agreements with the Customs Union, and that these agreements must undergo an examination for compliance with the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU (Deutsche Welle, 2013). Former Foreign Minister Volodymyr Ohryzko believed that too much attention was being paid to the issue of Ukraine's observer status in the Customs Union since such a status did not exist. He tied this development to Ukraine and Russia's domestic issues by suggesting that "[t]his deal is a kind of selling of air – both on the Russian side and on the Ukrainian side, as they remembered that elections are just around the corner" (LBNews, 2013).

Generally, the consensus was that Ukraine's observer status in the Customs Union would not change anything. However, by June 2013, the agreement on the establishment of a free trade zone between Ukraine and the EU was seen as basically signed, and the negotiation process was characterized as completed (Ukrainska Pravda, 2013c). In the background of all this Customs Union charade, Ukraine was to sign the AA with the EU in November 2013, with both Kyiv and Brussels declaring their readiness to seal the deal in Vilnius. Elite critiques of the Customs Union highlighted the entrenched narrative of rejecting Soviet-style domination, with many viewing European integration as a means of breaking free from

Ukraine's colonial past and Russia's sphere of influence and achieving long-term sovereignty.

On the dawn of the Vilnius summit in November 2013, Razumkov's report found that most surveyed Ukrainians supported accession to the EU. However, opinions on joining the Customs Union were more controversial and evenly split, with 39% in favor and 39% opposed (Razumkov Center, 2013, p. 110). The leader of the parliamentary faction of the ruling Party of Regions, Oleksandr Yefremov, confirmed this by saying

> Now, many, to put it mildly, do not entirely positively assess the actions of the leadership of our state if they are aimed at closer rapprochement with the Russian Federation. If the opinion is formed in society that accession to the Customs Union will contribute to improving the lives of Ukrainian citizens, then there will be no special problems with this issue. Perhaps the signals coming from the Customs Union member countries today are mostly negative (Ukrainska Pravda, 2013c).

Given that both the Ukrainian state and its people—elites and ordinary citizens alike—had consistently expressed their intention to move away from the past and toward a European future, their actions, albeit slow and hesitant, reflected this commitment. Yanukovych's rejection of the EU Association Agreement in November 2013 came as a bolt from the blue.

This fueled the *people vs. elites* divide, and the critical mass of people driven by the *svidomi vs. not* dynamics protested this decision. It is interesting to note the difference in societal response and impact that Ukrainians had on their government's foreign policy U-turn as opposed to a similar situation the same year in Armenia. This formerly Soviet republic just like Ukraine and the Baltics, after three years of negotiations, was on due course to sign the same AA with the EU in 2013 alongside Ukraine (European Commission, 2013). However, on September 3, the presidents of Russia and Armenia issued a joint statement announcing Armenia's decision to join the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Qazaqstan, as well as its intention to participate in the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (Ananicz, 2013). This meant Armenia's immediate termination of all previously made agreements made with the EU. Following this U-turn, Armenian riot police clashed with approximately 100

protesters during an unauthorized demonstration in Yerevan, opposing Armenia's accession to the Russian-led Customs Union. A dozen activists were detained during the confrontation (Radio Free Europe, 2013) but that was the end of it. If Ukraine's civil response had been as weak as Armenia's, Yanukovych could have further consolidated his power and secured a second term in 2015. This suggests that civil society and citizen activism in Ukraine played a crucial role in accelerating the country's pace of change (Solonenko, 2015).

Yanukovych, however, did not learn the lessons from the Orange Revolution and proceeded to suppress the civil uprising driven by the narratives of *people vs. elites* and *svidomi vs. not* (Ambrosio, 2017). The peaceful protests of hundreds of thousands of *svidomi* Ukrainians, later known as Euromaidan, led to Yanukovych's impeachment, installment of the new government, and snap Presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014. The new, President Poroshenko, signed the economic part of the Ukraine–EU AA on 27th June 2014, and the Parliament repelled the non-aligned status of Ukraine on 23rd December of the same year as demanded by the people of Ukraine who made it clear to the elites what their vision for Ukraine's foreign policy was. The post-Euromaidan reforms, including the EU Association Agreement, signified the culmination of societal and elite struggles to overcome the legacy of colonialism and affirmed Ukraine's identity as a European nation, making a decisive step in its decolonization journey.

The widespread distrust in the elites drove support for foreign policies that aligned Ukraine with democratic Western institutions like the EU and NATO. This public pressure constrained the elites' ability to pursue closer ties with Russia, as doing so risked further alienating the populace. As more citizens identified as "*svidomi*," there was a growing societal push for aligning foreign policy with European values and democratic norms. As the government deepened the *people vs. elites* divide, the more *svidomi* people became. This shift pressured political leaders to prioritize EU integration over Russian partnerships, especially

during the Euromaidan, which domestically also became known as the Revolution of Dignity, highlighting the citizens' rising self-awareness while becoming more *svidomi*.

Cluster 2: *Reality vs. Imposition, Ukraine and its Others & Struggle for National Identity, Ukrainians' Unity in Diversity*

The popular narrative of *reality vs. imposition* proposed that the perceived binary domestic division of Ukraine—between East and West—was artificial, externally imposed, and lacked meaningful impact on interpersonal relations among Ukrainian citizens. It condemned political elites for exploiting remnants of the Soviet regime to serve their political goals, particularly during election campaigns under President Yanukovych. This narrative critiqued how cultural, linguistic, and regional differences were instrumentalized to polarize society, creating a false dichotomy. Despite these divisions, the narrative underscored a prevailing civic identity and a shared preference for democratic values that aligned with Ukraine's pro-European aspirations.

Stemming from the critique of imposed divisions, the narrative of *Ukraine and its Others* goes above the assumed EU vs. Russia foreign policy binary choice divide and reflected an internal dialogue about Ukraine's place within the world. It drew from the *irreversible past* narrative of the previous decade, emphasizing the rediscovery of Ukraine's European roots and its struggle to affirm a European identity distinct from Russia's colonial influence. This narrative presented Europe as a beacon of hope and democratic ideals while acknowledging skepticism regarding Europe's willingness to embrace Ukraine fully. It rejected Russia's framing of Ukraine as a "brotherly nation" and instead highlighted Ukraine's desire for an independent, sovereign trajectory rooted in pre-colonial heritage.

The elites' narrative of *the struggle for national identity* explored Ukraine's continuous efforts to shape its national identity, emphasizing the significance of language,

culture, and historical memory in defining its statehood and European ambitions. Both Yushchenko and Yanukovych rejected ethnic nationalism in favor of an inclusive civic identity that embraces Ukraine's linguistic and cultural diversity. Yushchenko's advocacy for a civic national identity grounded in historical narratives and European ideals was complemented by Yanukovych's more practical stance on European integration, focusing on present opportunities rather than past hardships. The narrative argued for Ukraine's journey of self-discovery and alignment with Europe, framing this process as part of the country's decolonization. Yanukovych's inconsistent messaging, such as advocating for unity and European integration while simultaneously entertaining ideas like granting the Russian language an official status and lukewarm affirmation of the "two brotherly nations" narrative, revealed a lack of coherence and decisiveness, which ultimately fueled public skepticism about his commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, irreversibility of the past, and European future. All in all, this narrative portrayed Ukraine's identity as a fluid and evolving concept closely tied to its European roots and future aspirations.

Complementing the narratives of imposed division and elite struggle, the narrative of *Ukrainians' unity in diversity* presented competing and complementary perspectives of Ukrainian elites on national unity in Ukraine's diverse society. Yushchenko acknowledged Ukraine's inherited divisions from its colonial past and stressed the need for a civic national identity, dialogue, and historical awareness to achieve unity. He proposed to address imposed culture wars and to foster reconciliation through time and forgiveness. In contrast, Yanukovych did not explicitly condemn the colonial past and took a more pragmatic approach, focusing on federalization to empower regions and ensure unity through regional self-sufficiency, aligning with European integration models. Despite their differing approaches, both presidents saw Ukraine's diversity as a strength rather than a weakness and emphasized the importance of national cohesion within a European context.

Together, these narratives illustrate Ukraine's ongoing journey of identity formation, wayfinding through internal divisions and external aspirations. While historical legacies and elite maneuvering have shaped the discourse, the prevailing themes of civic identity, European integration, and national unity continued to define Ukraine's trajectory between 2004 and 2014. As Ukraine strived to balance its diverse heritage with its aspirations for a European future, these narratives serve as vital lenses to better understand its evolving foreign policy.

The Orange Revolution and Euromaidan both challenged the notion of an imposed Ukraine's domestic East-West binary by demonstrating a collective, grassroots movement that transcended artificial divisions. The public uprisings showed Ukrainian society united in rejecting authoritarianism, advocating for democratization and European integration. The narrative of *reality vs. imposition* served as a lens to critique the manipulative strategies of political elites, such as Yanukovych's regime, who attempted to exploit regional differences for personal or political gain. The protests revealed that such divisions were less reflective of societal divides and more reflective of elite-driven narratives. At the end of both revolutions, it was the Ukrainian citizens who brought about the change in Ukraine's both domestic and foreign policies. Applying these narratives as a lens to look into Ukraine's foreign policy supports the argument made in this thesis that Ukraine's foreign policy was primarily driven by Ukraine's domestic dynamics and not by geopolitics. If anything, given Yanukovych's refusal to sign the EU deal, the interplay of elites' and popular narratives shows that Ukraine's foreign policy was made despite the geopolitical pressures, especially from Russia.

The Orange Revolution was a central moment in Ukraine's internal dialogue about its place in the world, decolonizing its past, its separation from Russia, and seeing its future in Europe. Yanukovych's inability to acknowledge Ukraine's colonial heritage and move away from the Kremlin's narrative of "brotherly nations" (TSN, 2013) amplified the popular

narratives of *reality vs. imposition* and Ukraine's relations with its Others. As a result, policies that were seen as aligning with Russian interests faced significant domestic opposition. The public's alignment with democratic values was contrasted with any possible authoritarian trajectories, such as possible joint projects with Russia. The Euromaidan solidified the trajectory planned by Yushchenko after the Orange Revolution.

The repeated rejection of full Customs Union membership by both elites and the public demonstrated Ukraine's resistance to Russian-imposed colonial narratives and economic dependencies. The narratives of this cluster viewed Ukraine's foreign policy of European integration as not merely a geopolitical choice but a statement of identity—redefining Ukraine as European and rejecting its historical association with Russia. Russia was positioned as the "other" that embodied authoritarianism, economic exploitation, and colonial legacies, while Europe represented democratic values, sovereignty, and modernity. While Yanukovych's contradictory rhetoric of supporting EU integration while exploring Customs Union observer status showed the incoherence and hesitations in elite strategies, it was still more reflective of Ukraine's foreign policy as pro-European as opposed to "balancing" or "bandwagoning".

The dominant message from Ukrainian elites during this decade was clear: Ukraine was to sign the Association Agreement and work toward eventual EU membership. There was no indication of a U-turn, postponement, or any intention to pursue closer ties with Russia. Even those advocating for joining the Customs Union as an observer consistently framed it as a separate matter, emphasizing that it would not and should not hinder Ukraine's EU integration. This pragmatic and flexible approach was encapsulated by the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, who stated in May 2013, "[o]ur position is simple: we will join all agreements of the Customs Union that do not contradict our commitments to the EU" (UNIAN, 2013). While this position was unrealistic from the EU's perspective, it resonated

with citizens, as elites promised an EU deal regardless of the obstacles. The elites understood the public's desire for a European future. However, when the elites abruptly reversed course, they deviated from the widely accepted and shared narrative of a European future. This U-turn undermined the collective vision of moving forward, rejecting the past, and aligning the elites' decisions with the people's will. Ultimately, despite Ukraine's regional and cultural differences, the protests against Yanukovych's U-turn on the AA deal exemplified national unity around democratic and European values and preferred foreign policy.

The interplay of this cluster's narratives shows Ukrainians' rejection of Russian influence and the assertion of Ukraine's agency; emphasizes the identity-driven nature of Ukraine's foreign policy, as it sought alignment with Europe and distanced itself from Russia; reflects the tensions between public demands and elite hesitations, with societal pressure ultimately driving foreign policy shifts; and qualifies the strength of Ukrainian civil society in overcoming internal divisions to pursue a collective vision of Ukraine's European future.

Conclusion

On February 28, 2022, only four days after the full-scale invasion, Ukraine applied for membership in the EU. This important step toward Europe was not made because of Russia's war and geopolitical pressure but despite them. While the war with Russia accelerated this process, it originated long before. Many scholars and political leaders, both within Ukraine and internationally, view the post-2014 period as marking a definitive turn toward the West in Ukraine's foreign policy. I argued instead that roots for Ukraine's pro-European foreign policy preference can be traced to the country's domestic dynamics decade earlier. Centering Ukraine's agency by looking at popular and elite narratives and the interplay thereof, I reflected on how the narratives from 2004 to 2014 laid the groundwork for Ukraine's ultimate

turn toward the West after 2014. Applying these narratives and their interplay is essential and critically relevant for understanding Ukraine's foreign policy and resistance against Russian aggression today, as they contribute to a better understanding of Ukraine's foreign policy through the lens of identity-driven narratives rather than geopolitical pragmatism alone.

The reinterpretation of Ukraine's foreign policy between 2004 and 2014 offered in this chapter was based on considering the interplay of popular and elites' narratives about Ukraine's national identity and the nation's future. Using the narratives as elements of elite-public dynamic interplay served as a lens through which Ukraine's domestic politics and foreign policy developments were reconstructed as society- and identity-driven rather than as simple responses of the elites to geopolitical pressures. Despite Ukraine's regional diversity, shaped by various historical and often unjust reasons, the country's repeated and largely unified response to the elites' Soviet-style inertia and failure to decisively pursue European integration suggests that Ukraine's presumed domestic divide was neither as meaningful nor as influential in shaping domestic or foreign policy. The decade of 2004-2014 was a pivotal period in which Ukraine's foreign policy evolved from being reactive to being more assertively identity-driven. As analyzed through the lens of narratives interplay, the events of this decade set the stage for the post-2014 foreign policy that firmly aligned Ukraine with the West. The decolonization of Ukraine's foreign policy narrative, which was moving away from Russian influence and towards European integration, was deeply rooted in the interplay of popular and elites' narratives.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

Starting in 2014 and especially after 2022, research on Ukraine has increasingly portrayed the country's national identity as more civic and unified. Scholars have highlighted a growing shift among both the general public and elites toward using the Ukrainian language and supporting EU integration. The Euromaidan Revolution of 2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the war in Donbas were widely seen as turning points in Ukraine's domestic landscape and foreign policy orientation. Furthermore, Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 appeared to mark the moment when Ukraine's foreign policy became irreversibly pro-Western.

While I agree with the findings on post-2014 Ukrainian research, I challenged the premise that these transformations in national identity and foreign policy emerged solely as a reaction to and only after Russian military aggression. Although the war with Russia undeniably accelerated these shifts, I argued that the foundations of Ukraine's growing national unity and pro-European foreign policy were laid long before the invasion, and, as such, challenged some of the core assumptions latent in recent scholarly work.

In this thesis, I explored the interplay between popular and elite narratives of Ukraine's national identity and how these narratives were reflected in the country's foreign policy between 2004 and 2014. My research challenged the dominant perception of pre-2014 Ukraine as a nation deeply divided between a pro-European, Ukrainian-speaking West and a pro-Russian, Russophone Southeast, while offering new insights into the construction of national identity and a reinterpretation of Ukraine's foreign policy during this decade.

In the Literature Review chapter, I positioned my research within existing academic debates on Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy from 1994 to 2014. There, I identified key research gaps and formulated my research question. Chapter 3 established the

conceptual foundation of this project by defining national identity and examining its relationship to foreign policy. I also outlined Societal Constructivism and interpretivism as the theoretical and methodological frameworks underpinning this thesis, justified my choice of primary data and selection criteria, and explained how I applied narrative analysis and ethnographic content analysis.

In Chapter 4, I contextualized the main timeframe of the thesis by presenting popular and elite narratives from 1994 to 2004. Chapters 5 and 6 respectively reconstructed popular and elite narratives between 2004 and 2014 concerning Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy. Finally, in Chapter 7, I offered a reinterpretation of Ukraine's foreign policy during this period as a form of introspective wayfinding toward the European Union, shaped by the interplay between popular and elite narratives.

In the following sections, I summarize the main findings, discuss their implications, and highlight areas for future research.

Summary of Key Findings

I identified four main findings by reconstructing popular and elite narratives about pre-2014 Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy and looking at their interplay in this study.

First, Ukraine's public and the elite perceived Ukraine's regional, linguistic, religious, and ethnic differences as diversity and a unifying element rather than division and an obstacle to a cohesive national identity. This challenges previous assumptions about Ukraine's binary domestic landscape, often overstated and widely presumed to be a defining factor. While Ukrainians indeed differed in their languages, religious and ethnic background, it was not meaningful enough to either make them see other Ukrainians as their ontological Other or to prompt Ukraine's foreign policy to balance between the West and Russia. Popular narratives

of marginal ambiguity and *reality vs. imposition* aligned with elite narratives of *pragmatic pluralism* and Ukrainians' unity in diversity and thus contributed to the perception of differences as diversity and provided valent space for social cohesiveness. While the elite tried to instrumentalize cultural differences for electoral wins, popular narratives framed these so-called "culture wars" as the tension between reality and imposition alongside the narrative of *svidomi vs. not*. As a result, these divisions were rendered meaningless and failed to qualify Ukraine's foreign policy as balancing between the West and Russia due to the assumed domestic binary divide.

Second, the most significant and growing divide was between the people and the elite, who struggled to break away from Soviet-style governance and inertia fully. In contrast, the gap between *svidomi* and non-*svidomi* Ukrainians, though real, was gradually narrowing as more individuals became self-aware of their national identity, ultimately strengthening national unity even before 2014. Regardless of locale, language, religious, and ethnic background, a growing majority of Ukrainians were utterly dissatisfied with the elite no matter what party they belonged to. This dissatisfaction, in large part, prompted the growth of the *svidomi* segment of Ukrainian society, and as a result, the tension between *svidomi* and not became weaker, which in turn made the tension between people and the elite stronger. This further reinforces the previous finding, affirming that, despite apparent differences, Ukrainians shared more common ground than previously believed—well before the existential war with Russia.

Third, Ukraine's foreign policy was shaped by the interplay of the popular and elite narratives rather than purely by cost-benefit calculations and persisted despite external pressure. The popular narratives of *disoriented irreversibility, audacious fearfulness, Ukraine and its Others* reinforced by the elite narratives of *irreversible past, European future, legacy and ghost of Totalitarianism/Colonialism* and *wayfinding toward European integration* drove

the at times hesitant, yet gradual and pragmatic pro-Western foreign policy of Ukraine even before2014. When the elites' actions aligned with their professed discourses of irreversibility of the old structures and going toward a European future aligned with popular demand for a foreign policy that would have positive, democratic implications for Ukraine's future, such as moving closer to the EU, Ukrainians could overlook the slow pace of reform and graduality in Ukraine's integration into Western institutions. Whenever the elite was moving away from their declared narratives and promises to the backward direction of either following Russia's government style (as in 2004) or even so a potential departure from the EU integration (as in 2013-14), and thus clashing with the popular narratives, Ukrainians protested and demanded a government that would be more consistent with what Ukrainians wanted for their domestic and foreign policy. This came as a significant economic and human cost for Ukraine, yet despite the economic and military pressure from Russia, as I have argued in this thesis, the popular narratives seemed to persist even before the full-scale invasion.

Fourth, the Ukrainian elite, albeit inconsistently and hesitantly, had been wayfinding their path toward Europe ever since Ukraine regained independence. The reconstructed elite narratives suggest that while Yushchenko and Yanukovych differed in the degree they blamed the Soviet and Russian empires for Ukraine's issues, as well as tactics regarding relations with Russia, they both framed their key foreign policy vector as European integration and cooperation with Russia, not at the expense of Ukraine's European aspirations. What Yanukovych did in late 2013 contradicted both his earlier promises and the vision for Ukraine's future that his narratives had consistently projected. Being out of line with popular narratives, it provoked the Euromaidan revolution. Narratively, for Ukraine's presidents, governments, and parliaments, European integration was not a matter of choice but rather of time and manner. This suggests a much-needed shift in understanding pre-2014 Ukraine's foreign policy. Ukraine's relations with Russia under Kuchma, Yushchenko, and

Yanukovych should not be seen as 'multi-vector' or 'balancing' but rather wayfinding, navigating towards the EU as their final destination yet having to use a faulty GPS, which contributed to Ukraine's hesitancy, graduality, and sometimes inconsistency about its moves.

The main findings of my research challenge widespread assumptions about Ukraine's national identity and foreign policy before 2014, provide new insights into pre-2014 Ukraine's national identity by highlighting the roots of Ukrainians' civic and unified identity, and reinterpret Ukraine's foreign policy as continuous wayfinding toward Europe.

Ukraine's Foreign Policy Characteristics and Wayfinding

As for the specific characteristics of Ukraine's foreign policy between 2004 and 2014, the following conclusions can be made.

Ukraine's foreign policy during the decade between the revolutions took a *haphazard yet gradually pro-European approach*. The key foreign policy developments discussed in this chapter indicate a messy yet persistent pro-European orientation. Yanukovych introduced some inconsistency with his Customs Union observer shenanigans and brutal U-turn on the EUAA deal. Yet, his overall rhetoric and actions, such as rejecting full Customs Union membership, suggested the continuation of an overall pro-European trend.

Ukraine's foreign policy at that time was also bas*ed on pragmatism in decision-making*. Ukraine depended on Russia for gas and trade, requiring the elites to navigate Ukraine's European aspirations in a way that would not jeopardize Ukraine's economic relations with Russia. This pragmatism should not be equated with bandwagoning. Just as any other European country, Ukraine maintained pragmatic relations with energy-rich Russia based on their national interests.

Similarly, Ukraine's *foreign policy pluralism* at the time should not be mistaken for balancing. The pluralistic nature of Ukrainian society, often fueled by culture wars imposed

by the elites and resisted by *svidomi* Ukrainians, influenced a foreign policy that was not rigidly pro-Western or pro-Russian. This further contributed to Ukraine's foreign policy's haphazard and often inconsistent nature. Yet, the overall trajectory remained pro-European.

The debate on what Ukraine was and what Ukraine should be, reconstructed from the narratives, challenges the popular and preconceived idea of Ukraine simply balancing between powers. Ukraine's *deep struggle for national identity and direction* challenges the notion of its foreign policy being multi-vector.

Instead, Ukraine's foreign policy during this period resembled introspective wayfinding rather than a simplistic balancing or multi-vector foreign policy. The themes, questions, and discussions dominating the decade's narratives suggest that Ukraine's foreign policy was a *process of wayfinding* its post-Soviet identity and geopolitical positioning.

Finally, the *decolonizing dynamic* shaped Ukraine's foreign policy, reflecting a desire to assert Ukraine's sovereignty and distinct identity beyond post-Soviet frameworks. The decolonizing narratives of an *irreversible past*, a *European future*, and confronting the ghost of colonialism shaped Ukraine's orientation away from Russian influence towards a pro-EU foreign policy.

Implications for Understanding (Ukraine's) Foreign Policy

In today's complex and increasingly multipolar world, it is important to rethink how academics study smaller states' foreign policy choices. Despite the popularity of Realist geopolitics and the appeal of simplified big power games, more nuanced approaches are needed to center smaller yet strong voices. This research proposes a theoretical framework that views foreign policy as *introspective wayfinding* rather than a balancing act. Foreign policy as a *process of wayfinding* offers insights into a state's domestic dynamics, which may or may not impact its foreign policy, while still recognizing the state's and its people's agency in international relations. Viewing a state's *identity as a process and dynamic*

spectrum helps better understand the complexities behind controversial and inconsistent foreign policy choices. This approach further contributes to the literature on 'small states' by centering the voices of smaller states and positioning them as agents of IR rather than mere objects.

This also connects with the need to advance *decolonizing perspectives* in IR. Ukraine's case has broader implications for understanding decolonization in post-Soviet spaces and beyond, especially in the times of peace. Despite many losses, Ukraine's efforts to break free from Russian influence and assert a sovereign foreign policy show that a smaller state can pursue an independent foreign policy despite geopolitical pressures, challenging mainstream Realist assumptions.

This study of Ukraine's domestic dynamics and foreign policy developments argues for *moving beyond binaries*, both domestic and international. Much IR research based on traditional theories focuses on presumed mutually exclusive binaries, producing studies founded on a restrictive and possibly faulty "either-or" premises. Such approaches can be overly restrictive and, in some cases, misleading, as they may overlook the complexities and nuances of international affairs. Many IR studies framed the Cold War as a strict ideological battle between two opposing systems, capitalism and communism. However, countries like Yugoslavia and China pursued their own versions of socialism, demonstrating that the divide was not absolute. Similarly, many IR studies assume that European states must either fully integrate into the European Union or remain entirely sovereign. However, the UK's pre-Brexit status and Norway's relationship with the EU show that states can adopt hybrid models of integration. The Brexit referendum was framed in either Leave or Remain, yet the possibilities of partial integration, such as the UK's ongoing participation in certain EU programs and close security cooperation since 2022 were underexplored. The reliance on "either-or" binaries in IR research oversimplifies political and social dynamics, often leading

to one-sided or even misleading conclusions. By acknowledging hybrid positions, fluid identities, overlapping influences, and processuality of foreign policy scholars can better capture the complexities of international relations in contemporary politics.

In this thesis, I tried to transcend Ukraine's East vs. West and pro-EU vs. pro-Russian binaries in analyzing Ukraine's foreign policy and demonstrated that doing so is both possible and necessary. Going beyond binaries and looking into domestic narratives and dynamics makes it possible to produce a more nuanced understanding of counterintuitive events that challenge mainstream theories such as Realism and Liberalism.

The reinterpretation of Ukraine's foreign policy between 2004 and 2014 challenges conventional theories and deepens understanding of both Ukraine's past and present foreign policy. This challenges existing narratives and provides a fresh perspective on post-Soviet foreign policy analysis, centering smaller states' voices and focusing on dynamics between citizens and elites. Future research may explore the interplay of narratives, identity spectrums, and decolonizing language in shaping post-colonial foreign policies of smaller states.

Contributions to Knowledge

In this thesis, I make empirical, theoretical, methodological, and conceptual contributions to Ukrainian area studies, societal constructivism, International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis.

Empirically, drawing on original data such as popular novels and memoirs, I offered more nuanced insights into the process of Ukraine's national identity evolution after regaining independence and before it was affected by the ongoing existential invasion launched by Russia in 2014. I emphasized the importance of investigating the roots of Ukraine's civic

national identity and unity and becoming more Ukrainian-speaking and pro-European, which can and should be studied more in times of peace when Ukrainians did not have to respond to extreme external factors.

Theoretically, I contributed to Societal Constructivism by engaging with popular narratives of national identity, emphasizing the interplay of popular and elite narratives, and highlighting the leading role of the former over the latter. Traditionally, constructivists have given elite narratives a primary focus, prescribing popular narratives predominantly as reactive to those of the elite. While I agree that the elite is the main foreign policy narrator and maker, by looking into the unifying popular narratives of Ukrainian society as my case study, I argue for elevating popular narratives within research that takes on a constructivist lens. Previous research on Ukrainian politics overemphasized elites and thus contributed to a simplistic binary view of Ukraine's national identity and consequently attributed it to Ukraine's foreign policy as balancing between the West and Russia. By looking at popular narratives, I have been able to challenge this and in turn demonstrate the value of bringing a greater focus to popular narratives in constructivist research on foreign policy.

Methodologically, I contributed to Societal Constructivism and critical IR in general by using popular novels, movies, and newspapers as my primary source to reconstruct Ukraine's national identity discourses. Moving away from subjective-oriented quantitative surveys, which provide statistical yet static data, and by recreating more intersubjective inquiries into Ukrainian society, I offered a more nuanced picture of Ukraine's domestic dynamics, which better reflects Ukraine's national identity evolutionary process.

Conceptually, I proposed to look at national identity and foreign policy as narratives and processes, contributed to similar critical and constructivist conceptualizations, and advanced them further. Viewing a state's identity as a dynamic and evolving process provides deeper insight into the complexities behind ostensibly controversial and inconsistent foreign

policy decisions. Conceptualizing a smaller state's foreign policy as wayfinding rather than balancing or bandwagoning allows one to step back from a realpolitik-constrained position, credits a smaller state's agency, and is more appropriate for decolonization efforts in IR.

These contributions enhance academics' understanding of popular narratives' importance, role in the interplay with elite narratives, and entanglement of national identity and foreign policy. Additionally, these contributions provide a foundation for future studies.

Directions for Future Research

Based on my approach and findings, future research can explore the relationship between national identity and foreign policy in other smaller states, particularly post-Communist or transitioning nations. Additionally, examining popular literature and screen media produced by these states could offer deeper insights into how their national identities evolved following regime changes.

Traditionally, postcolonial studies—exemplified by Said's seminal work *Orientalism*—have analyzed the literature of empires to understand how colonizers perceived and related to the colonized. In contrast, the approach adopted in this thesis reverses that focus by centering the narratives of the colonized. This shift offers a more decolonized perspective, moving away from the dominant voice of the colonizer and foregrounding the experiences and self-understandings of those subjected to imperial rule.

Likewise, applying my framework of wayfinding for assessing other post-colonial or "in-between" states' foreign policy can better capture how smaller states assert agency and reshape their geopolitical positioning outside traditional IR frameworks, potentially leading to broader decolonization of foreign policy analysis in International Relations.

Practical Implications

The insights from the thesis have practical implications for journalists, foreign policy experts, and policymakers. Understanding that the roots of Ukraine's national identity and its European choice stem from decades before the Russian invasion refutes the Kremlin narratives of NATO expansion and NATO threat, Ukraine being an artificial state populated by the same people as Russians or any other made-up reason that Russia used to justify its decision to invade Ukraine other than Russia's imperialistic and revanchist ambitions. Consequently, this affects how peace negotiations and demands for Russia and Ukraine can and should be constructed within media and policymakers' discourses. The findings of this thesis emphasize the importance of securing Ukraine's future within the EU and NATO as long as Russia does not stop thinking that Ukraine does not have the right to exist as a sovereign and independent nation.

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