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Research into the Historical and Cultural Foundations of Ukrainian Identity in the Context of European Cultural Processes

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Abstract

The full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 intensified scholarly and public debate over the historical foundations of Ukrainian identity and its relationship to Europe. Because Russian state discourse frequently denies the legitimacy of a distinct Ukrainian nation, a historically grounded analysis of identity formation has both academic and civic relevance. This study examines six interrelated dimensions of Ukrainian identity—linguistic, religious, political, artistic, intellectual, and national revival—through a structured review of peer-reviewed scholarship, public survey data, and institutional reports. The analysis combines comparative-historical, chronological, and structural-functional approaches to trace continuity and change from Kievan Rus to the present. Source selection prioritized works published in 2016–2025 that directly addressed one or more of the six dimensions, supplemented by foundational historical studies and public datasets. The findings indicate that

Ukrainian identity has developed through sustained interaction with European cultural processes rather than outside them: language has become a stronger marker of civic solidarity; religious history shows mediation between Eastern and Western Christian traditions; political culture preserves traditions of self-organization and protest mobilization; artistic and intellectual life demonstrate durable participation in European cultural and educational networks; and the nineteenth-century national revival followed patterns comparable to those of other stateless European nations. The study does not claim an exhaustive history of every dimension, but it offers an integrated framework for understanding how historical experience, cultural production, and contemporary mobilization reinforce Ukrainian national consciousness in a European context.

Keywords: Ukrainian identity, European culture, nation-building, cultural heritage, historical analysis, language policy

1. INTRODUCTION

National identity has become one of the central questions of contemporary Europe, where globalization, migration, geopolitical conflict, and renewed debates about sovereignty are reshaping older models of political belonging. Ukraine offers a particularly revealing case because questions of language, memory, religion, political community, and geopolitical orientation have become inseparable from the struggle for state survival. Russia's full-scale invasion of 2022 not only intensified the military dimension of that struggle, but also sharpened international debate over the historical legitimacy of a distinct Ukrainian nation and its place within European civilization.

Russian aggression has been accompanied by a sustained discursive campaign that portrays Ukrainians as a branch of the "great Russian people" rather than a separate nation with its own historical trajectory [1]. That rhetoric draws on long-standing imperial narratives and makes scholarly analysis of Ukrainian identity more than a purely descriptive exercise. A careful historical account matters because arguments about identity, memory, and cultural continuity now shape diplomatic, legal, and moral claims about sovereignty, occupation, and belonging. In that sense, the war is also a conflict over historical interpretation and symbolic geography.

The events of Euromaidan in 2013–2014 marked a decisive phase in the rearticulation of Ukrainian identity. Studies of post-Euromaidan society show that many citizens, including Russian-speaking Ukrainians, increasingly redefined their belonging in explicitly Ukrainian civic terms while distancing themselves from Russian state-centered narratives [2]. This process deepened after 2014 and intensified again after 2022, when identification with Ukraine became bound to resistance, political agency, and the defense of democratic self-government.

Ukraine's European orientation must also be understood historically rather than only geopolitically. For much of the post-Soviet period, European integration was discussed as a project of modernization, institutional reform, and external alignment. Under wartime conditions, however, it has also come to signify security, cultural recognition, and the defense of a political community understood as part of a broader European space of values [3]. A historical-cultural analysis is therefore necessary to clarify whether Ukraine's European choice represents a recent strategic turn or the contemporary expression of longer trajectories.

Although the international literature on Ukraine has expanded rapidly since 2014, important gaps remain. Existing scholarship is rich on war, memory politics, and post-2014 identity change, but it is less successful at integrating these contemporary findings with a longer historical account of how linguistic, religious, political, artistic, intellectual, and national-revival processes interacted over time. Comparative references to Central and Eastern Europe are also frequent yet often brief and unsystematic. What is still needed is a structured synthesis that places the Ukrainian case within broader European patterns without flattening its specific historical experience.

The aim of this study is to examine the historical and cultural foundations of Ukrainian identity in relation to European cultural processes from Kievan Rus to the present. More specifically, the article pursues four tasks: (1) to synthesize scholarship on the principal dimensions of Ukrainian identity; (2) to trace the historical development of each dimension across major periods; (3) to compare selected aspects of the Ukrainian trajectory with those of other European cases shaped by imperial domination and nation-building; and (4) to identify the features that make Ukrainian identity both recognizably European and historically distinctive. The contribution of the article is threefold. First, it offers an integrated six-dimensional analytical framework. Second, it brings recent empirical findings into dialogue with longer historical interpretation. Third, it provides a more explicit comparative reading of Ukraine's development within European cultural history. Rather than attempting to "prove" a civilizational thesis in advance, the study evaluates how far the available evidence supports the interpretation of Ukrainian identity as a historically grounded and internally differentiated component of European civilization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Ukrainian identity has expanded substantially since 2014, when Russian aggression pushed questions of nationhood, memory, sovereignty, and cultural belonging to the center of both academic and public debate. The recent literature spans sociology, political science, history, cultural studies, and education studies, but these strands are often only loosely connected. As a result, there is still a need for integrative work that relates contemporary transformations to longer historical patterns.

A major theoretical premise of the field is that national identity is not a fixed essence but a historically contingent and socially reproduced process. Wilson [4] interprets contemporary Ukrainian identity through the lens of identity construction under conditions of rupture, arguing that successive revolutionary moments and the ongoing war accelerated the consolidation of a distinct political nation. His analysis is particularly useful because it shows how external aggression can intensify internal consensus and reframe national belonging in explicitly European terms.

Kulyk [5] complements this line of interpretation with longitudinal empirical evidence. Drawing on multiple nationwide surveys and focus-group discussions conducted before and after the Russian invasions of 2014 and 2022, he shows that

national identity in Ukraine became both more salient and more emotionally charged. Importantly, the study demonstrates that civic attachment to the state and ethnocultural identification did not simply merge into a single homogeneous form; rather, they interacted in ways that varied by region, language practice, and political context. This work is especially valuable because it provides temporal depth to debates that are often discussed only in snapshot form.

Another important strand of scholarship concerns institutional change and symbolic politics. Shevel [6] analyzes post-Euromaidan decommunization as a complex process of memory restructuring rather than a purely administrative policy. Her work highlights a central tension relevant to this article: identity can be shaped by state institutions, yet it cannot be reduced to legal decree. This insight is crucial when interpreting the post-2014 reconfiguration of national narratives.

The internationalization of Ukraine's image in Europe has also become an important subject of analysis. Brooks and Rensimer [7] show that higher education institutions and academic networks have actively reframed Ukraine within a European normative and geopolitical space. Their work demonstrates that educational and intellectual institutions do not merely respond to war symbolically; they also participate in the production of legitimacy and belonging.

At the same time, the literature remains uneven in three respects. First, contemporary studies are often stronger on immediate political developments than on the longer cultural and historical foundations of identity. Second, comparative references to Central and Eastern European nation-building are common, but they are rarely developed into a clearly structured analytical framework. Third, the different components of identity—language, religion, political culture, artistic production, intellectual tradition, and national revival—are usually studied separately. The present article addresses these limitations by offering a structured synthesis across these dimensions and by using comparison not as a decorative reference but as a tool for contextualizing the Ukrainian case within wider European developments.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses an interdisciplinary qualitative design that combines historical analysis, comparative interpretation, and cultural analysis in order to examine the historical and cultural foundations of Ukrainian identity in the context of European cultural processes. The purpose is not to generate a new dataset, but to produce a transparent and analytically structured synthesis of existing scholarship and public evidence across six dimensions of identity.

The source corpus was assembled in three stages. First, peer-reviewed literature published mainly between 2016 and 2025 was screened for direct relevance to one or more of the six analytical dimensions addressed in the article. Second, foundational historical works and monographs were retained when they were necessary to interpret earlier periods or institutional developments. Third, public survey data and institutional reports were added where they provided recent empirical indicators of identity change or European integration. Works were included when they offered substantive historical, empirical, or conceptual evidence; materials with only incidental reference to identity were not used.

The main methodological approaches used in this study are:

1. *Comparative-historical approach*: this approach is used to situate the Ukrainian experience alongside selected European cases shaped by imperial domination, delayed statehood, or cultural revival, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The comparison is deliberately controlled and illustrative rather than exhaustive. It is intended to identify recurring mechanisms of language defense, religious institutionalization, political mobilization, and national revival without assuming that the Ukrainian case is identical to Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Finnish, or Irish trajectories.
2. *Chronological analysis*: the study traces the formation of identity from Kievan Rus (9th–13th centuries) through the Cossack era (15th–18th centuries), the national revival of the 19th century, the Soviet period, and the era of independence after 1991. This diachronic perspective makes it possible to distinguish long-term continuities from episodes of rupture and accelerated transformation.
3. *Structural-functional analysis*: the article examines six interrelated dimensions of identity—language, religion, political culture, artistic culture, intellectual tradition, and national revival—as analytically distinct but historically connected domains. The purpose of this approach is to show how these domains reinforce, constrain, or reinterpret one another within a broader European cultural setting.

The research is based on several categories of secondary material:

1. Peer-reviewed scientific articles published primarily in 2016–2025 in journals such as *Nationalities Papers*, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *Nations and Nationalism*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, and *Compare*, together with relevant Ukrainian academic journals. These sources provide recent theoretical debate and empirical evidence on identity change, war, and European integration.
2. Sociological research, especially the Razumkov Centre survey data [8], which provide recent indicators of change in self-identification, language preferences, and attitudes related to national belonging.

3. Monographic works on church history, the Holodomor, and decolonization of cultural interpretation [9, 10, 11, 12], which supply the longer historical depth required for the religious, cultural, and memory-related dimensions of the analysis.
4. Institutional reports, including Erasmus+ National Office Ukraine [13], which make it possible to assess the contemporary educational dimension of European integration through documented participation and exchange activity.
5. Cultural-heritage and visual-culture studies [14, 15, 16], which provide evidence on how artistic production, heritage preservation, and art education function as carriers of identity.
6. Data analysis was conducted in four steps: (1) identification of relevant evidence for each of the six dimensions; (2) chronological contextualization of that evidence within major historical periods; (3) triangulation across scholarly interpretation, public data, and institutional materials; and (4) comparison with selected European cases in order to distinguish broadly shared nation-building mechanisms from specifically Ukrainian historical features. The analytical tables included below are therefore heuristic syntheses derived from the literature rather than standalone primary datasets. This design improves transparency and makes the limits of the argument explicit: the article offers a structured interpretive synthesis, not an exhaustive historiography or a statistically generalizable model.

4. RESULTS

4.1. LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

Language has long served as one of the most visible markers of collective identity in Ukraine, especially in a context shaped by multilingual practice, imperial rule, and competing cultural centers [17]. Ukrainian emerged within the wider East Slavic linguistic continuum, yet it developed distinctive phonetic, lexical, and grammatical features that prevent it from being reduced to a regional variant of Russian or to a derivative form of another neighboring language.

The historical development of Ukrainian was strongly affected by political domination. In the nineteenth century, the Valuyev Circular of 1863 and the Ems Ukase of 1876 attempted to confine Ukrainian to informal and folkloric use by discouraging or banning its public use in publishing, education, and administration [18]. During the Soviet period, policies oscillated between limited recognition and renewed Russification, with important consequences for schooling, media, and professional life. Yet these pressures did not eliminate the language's role as a repository of cultural memory and local continuity.

The periods after Euromaidan and after the full-scale invasion produced a marked change in the symbolic status of the Ukrainian language. Kulyk [18] shows that language choice increasingly became associated with political solidarity, civic commitment, and resistance to aggression. The Razumkov Centre data [8], summarized in Table 1, indicate a substantial increase in the share of respondents identifying Ukrainian as their native language, from 60% in 2014 to 83% in 2024. These figures should not be read as a complete map of everyday language use, but they do provide a clear indicator of changing self-identification.

Table 1. Dynamics of the linguistic identity of Ukrainian citizens (2014-2024)

Year	Ukrainian as native language (%)	Russian as native language (%)	Both equally (%)
2014	60	24	16
2017	67	19	14
2020	74	15	11
2024	83	9	8

Source: Adapted from Razumkov Centre [8]

The relationship between language and ethnicity in Ukraine remains complex. Many ethnic Ukrainians historically used Russian in urban and professional settings, and linguistic practice did not automatically determine political loyalty or ethnic self-understanding [19]. Precisely for that reason, the recent shift toward Ukrainian has analytical significance: it reflects not simply demographic change, but a reevaluation of language as a public marker of belonging.

The preservation and expansion of Ukrainian also matter in the context of European integration. European multilingualism is based not on homogenization but on the recognition of linguistic diversity, and Ukrainian fits that framework as a national language with a deep literary and cultural tradition [20]. In this sense, strengthening Ukrainian does not contradict Europeanization; rather, it aligns Ukraine with a model of Europe in which national cultures are sustained through linguistic vitality.

Language also functions as a form of soft power. The wider visibility of Ukrainian in universities, cultural institutions, digital media, and public diplomacy since 2022 has increased the international legibility of Ukrainian culture [21]. Taken

together, the historical and contemporary evidence suggests that language in Ukraine is best understood not as a static ethnic marker, but as a dynamic site where cultural memory, civic solidarity, and European cultural visibility intersect.

4.2. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Religion has been one of the enduring frameworks through which cultural memory, collective belonging, and institutional continuity were maintained on Ukrainian territory. The Christianization of Kievan Rus in 988 connected these lands to the Byzantine Christian world, but the later history of Ukrainian religion unfolded at the meeting point of Eastern and Western Christian traditions [22]. This intermediate position is analytically important because it helps explain why religious identity in Ukraine has often been plural, contested, and politically significant.

Between the ninth and twelfth centuries, religious culture on the lands of present-day Ukraine developed through interaction among Slavic, Scandinavian, and Byzantine influences. Kyiv became a major ecclesiastical and cultural center, and local forms of church architecture, liturgy, and iconography evolved within a broad Orthodox framework while remaining open to wider transregional exchange [22]. For this reason, Ukrainian religious history cannot be reduced to a later Muscovite model of Orthodoxy.

The Union of Brest in 1596 illustrates the institutional complexity of this history. The emergence of the Greek Catholic Church, which preserved the Byzantine rite while recognizing papal authority, represented one attempt to negotiate between Eastern ritual continuity and Western political-religious alignment [10]. The union did not resolve confessional tensions; indeed, it generated long-term conflict. Nevertheless, it shows that religious development in Ukraine frequently involved mediation rather than isolation.

During periods of imperial domination, religious institutions also played a protective cultural role. Monasteries, churches, and clerical networks supported education, book culture, and the preservation of local traditions, even when political authorities pursued assimilationist strategies [9]. In this respect, religion became not only a matter of private belief but also an institutional carrier of historical memory.

The twentieth century introduced severe repression under Soviet atheistic policy. The liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church in 1946 and the state's attempts to subordinate Orthodoxy to political control weakened religious institutions, yet they did not erase religious practice or memory [9]. Confessional identity often survived through family transmission, local ritual life, and underground forms of worship, particularly in western regions.

After 1991, religious pluralization and institutional reconfiguration became central features of Ukrainian public life. The granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2019 represented a major symbolic and ecclesiastical development, especially because it linked religious independence to broader post-imperial self-definition. At the same time, contemporary Ukraine is marked less by a single confessional identity than by a plural religious field shaped by Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and secular currents. Such pluralism is compatible with broader European norms of freedom of conscience and helps explain why religious identity in Ukraine functions as a historical resource rather than a simple civilizational binary [23, 24]. Overall, the religious dimension supports the interpretation of Ukrainian identity as historically situated at a European crossroads rather than at an external frontier.

4.3. POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS

Ukrainian political culture developed under conditions of repeated statelessness, foreign domination, and episodic self-rule. For that reason, it should not be described as a linear tradition of democracy in the modern sense. Rather, it consists of recurrent practices of self-organization, negotiated authority, communal participation, and protest mobilization that later informed modern democratic aspirations [25].

The Zaporizhzhia Sich of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries is one of the most frequently cited historical reference points in this regard. Although it was a military and frontier polity rather than a modern representative democracy, it contained practices of elective leadership, collective deliberation, and limits on personal authority that distinguished it from more centralized autocratic systems of the region. Table 2 summarizes these institutional contrasts in a deliberately schematic form.

Table 2. Comparison of forms of political organization in Europe in the 17th-18th centuries

Characteristics	Zaporizhzhya Sich	Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth	Muscovite Tsardom	Absolute monarchies of the West
Elective leadership	Broadly elective within the host	Elective monarchy limited to nobility	Dynastic	Predominantly dynastic
Limits on the ruler's power	Council-based and customary	Institutionally significant but estate-bound	Weak	Varied, often limited
Participation in decision-making	Military community participation	Noble estate participation	Highly restricted	Highly restricted
Social mobility	Relatively high within the host	Moderate for noble strata	Low	Low to moderate

Source: Compiled by the author based on Kysliuk [25]

The modern political significance of these traditions lies less in direct institutional continuity than in symbolic repertoires of freedom, self-government, and resistance to arbitrary rule. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, political crises

repeatedly activated these repertoires. The failed state-building efforts of 1917–1921, the student protests of 1990, the Orange Revolution of 2004, the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014, and resistance to Russian aggression after 2014 each reshaped expectations about citizenship, legitimacy, and public participation [26]. Table 3 therefore distinguishes not only the occurrence of these events but also the predominant scope of their impact.

Table 3. *Impact of revolutionary events on Ukraine's political culture*

<i>Event</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Key changes in political culture</i>	<i>Predominant scope of impact</i>
The Revolution on Granite	1990	Public legitimization of student-led civic protest	Agenda-setting
Orange Revolution	2004	Consolidation of electoral protest and anti-fraud mobilization	Institutional and normative
Revolution of Dignity	2013–2014	European orientation, civic sacrifice, stronger anti-authoritarian norms	Long-term institutional and symbolic
Resistance to aggression	2014–present	Wartime solidarity, civic volunteering, national consolidation	Ongoing systemic

Source: Adapted from Petryk [26]

European political ideas also mattered in shaping post-1991 Ukraine. Concepts such as the rule of law, constitutional restraint, human rights, and accountable government increasingly entered public discourse, especially through debates on European integration [27]. Yet these ideas were not simply imported; they were reinterpreted through local traditions of collective action and community self-organization.

The ethnic and linguistic diversity of Ukraine further complicates any overly rigid account of political identity. Onuch and Hale [28] show that ethnicity in Ukraine does not mechanically determine political orientation. Regional experience, civic mobilization, and language practice interact in more contingent ways. This flexibility is important because it helps explain how a broad political nation could consolidate without collapsing into a narrowly exclusionary ethnic model. The political dimension of Ukrainian identity is therefore best understood as a historically layered culture of self-organization that became increasingly compatible with European democratic norms under the pressure of crisis and war.

4.4. ARTISTIC CULTURE AND ART

Artistic culture is one of the principal media through which collective memory and national distinctiveness are preserved, translated, and made visible. On the lands of present-day Ukraine, artistic production developed at the intersection of Byzantine, Western European, and local traditions. This borderland position did not produce mere imitation; rather, it generated hybrid forms that can be read as evidence of both European connectedness and local creativity.

A particularly important example is Ukrainian Baroque in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Architecture, icon painting, church decoration, and monumental art from the Cossack period reveal a synthesis of Byzantine inheritance with Polish, Italian, and broader European Baroque influences [14]. Ukrainian Baroque is significant not because it duplicates Western styles, but because it adapts them to local religious, political, and aesthetic conditions. Table 4 summarizes major stages in this longer artistic trajectory.

Table 4. *Stages of development of Ukrainian artistic culture in the European context*

<i>Period</i>	<i>Dominant style</i>	<i>European influences</i>	<i>Unique Ukrainian features</i>
11th–13th centuries	Byzantine monumental culture	Constantinople and wider Christian East	Kyivan mural programs and mosaic traditions
17th–18th centuries	Baroque	Italy, Poland, Central Europe	Cossack Baroque and wooden church typologies
19th century	Romanticism/Realism	Germany, France, Central Europe	National-historical themes and folkloric imagery
1920s	Avant-garde	Paris, Berlin, European modernism	Ukrainian Constructivism and experimental design
21st century	Contemporary art	Global and European art networks	Postcolonial reflection and wartime visual testimony

Source: Compiled by the author based on Musienko [14] and Pavlichenko [15]

Cultural heritage in this context functions as both evidence and argument. Architectural monuments, sacred art, decorative arts, and museum collections document the long-standing participation of Ukrainian lands in wider European artistic circuits [14]. At the same time, heritage protection has acquired renewed political significance under wartime conditions, when museums, churches, archives, and urban monuments became targets of destruction and symbols of cultural resilience.

Contemporary visual culture continues this work of reinterpretation. Since 2014, and especially since 2022, Ukrainian artists have increasingly revisited folk motifs, Cossack imagery, local memory, and historical trauma in order to translate national experience into contemporary visual language [15]. The significance of this trend lies not only in national affirmation, but also in the creation of forms legible within broader European and global artistic conversations.

Art education further supports this continuity by transmitting technique, repertoire, and historical consciousness to younger generations while connecting Ukrainian practitioners to international networks [16]. For these reasons, the artistic dimension of Ukrainian identity should be seen as an active field of production and reinterpretation rather than a passive repository of inherited symbols.

4.5. INTELLECTUAL TRADITION AND EDUCATION

Ukraine's intellectual tradition developed through sustained interaction with broader European scholarly and educational currents, even when imperial authorities attempted to subordinate or isolate local institutions. The Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, founded in 1632, is central to this history because it institutionalized higher learning on Ukrainian territory within a framework that combined Orthodox intellectual culture with Latin education and wider European scholastic traditions.

This intellectual orientation continued through the circulation of students, clergy, scholars, and books across European universities and learned centers. Study in Krakow, Vienna, Prague, Leipzig, and other cities connected Ukrainian elites to the intellectual movements of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and later modernity. In the nineteenth century, institutions such as the Shevchenko Scientific Society in Lviv helped create spaces for scholarly publication and disciplinary development that resembled other European learned societies in both aspiration and practice.

The contemporary phase of this trajectory is visible in higher education reform and international academic exchange. Erasmus+ has become an important instrument of curricular modernization, institutional cooperation, and mobility. According to the Erasmus+ National Office Ukraine [13], more than 15,000 teachers and students participated in exchange activities in the 2022–2023 academic year despite wartime disruption. The number should not be treated as a complete measure of intellectual Europeanization, but it does document sustained participation in the European educational space.

The wartime experience of universities also has analytical value. Ukrainian higher education institutions have continued to teach, relocate, digitize, and maintain research activity under extreme pressure [32]. Their resilience reflects not only institutional survival, but also adherence to academic continuity, cooperation, and freedom as shared European norms. European universities, in turn, have supported Ukrainian scholars through grants, visiting positions, and infrastructure assistance, reinforcing the reciprocal dimension of this intellectual relationship.

Accordingly, the intellectual dimension of Ukrainian identity is not simply a story of borrowing from Europe. It is a story of participation, interruption, adaptation, and renewal within the wider European knowledge order. That long-term orientation helps explain why contemporary educational integration resonates so strongly with older patterns of institutional and cultural development.

4.6. NATIONAL REVIVAL IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The Ukrainian national revival of the nineteenth century can be understood as part of the broader European age of nation formation, in which language codification, historical narration, literary canon formation, voluntary associations, and political mobilization became central to the creation of modern national communities. Seen from this perspective, the Ukrainian case is not exceptional because it was unique in every respect, but because it combined familiar European mechanisms with the particular constraints of divided imperial rule.

Malanchuk-Rybak [29] identifies a progression from an academic phase focused on language, folklore, and history, to an organizational phase marked by cultural societies and early political initiatives, and finally to a political phase in which demands for autonomy and self-government became more explicit. This pattern broadly corresponds to Hroch-type models of nation-building among smaller European peoples and therefore supports a comparative reading of the Ukrainian revival.

At the same time, the Ukrainian case was complicated by imperial fragmentation. In Galicia under Austrian rule, Ukrainians had greater opportunities to publish, organize reading societies, and participate in political life, whereas in the Russian Empire language restrictions and censorship sharply constrained public cultural development. The Valuyev Circular and the Ems Ukase are especially important in this regard because they demonstrate how state repression directly shaped the forms through which national culture could be expressed.

Literature played a decisive role in converting cultural revival into broader social imagination. Ivan Kotlyarevsky's *Eneida* and the poetry of Taras Shevchenko helped establish Ukrainian as a language of literary prestige, moral critique, and national memory. Comparable processes can be observed in other European national movements, where writers such as Adam Mickiewicz, Karel Havlíček, or Johan Ludvig Runeberg linked literary production to cultural awakening. The value of such comparisons lies not in collapsing differences among cases, but in showing that the Ukrainian revival unfolded through mechanisms recognizable across nineteenth-century Europe.

The revival also had to confront assimilation into dominant imperial cultures. Sections of the nobility and urban elites were oriented toward Russian or Polish cultural frameworks, just as other stateless or subordinate peoples in Europe faced Anglicization, Francization, or similar pressures [30]. Ukrainian nation-building therefore required both cultural invention and cultural recovery. In this respect, the nineteenth-century revival provides one of the clearest points at which the European and specifically Ukrainian dimensions of identity formation can be studied together.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis supports the interpretation that Ukrainian identity developed through sustained interaction with European cultural processes rather than in isolation from them. Taken together, the six dimensions examined here show a consistent pattern: identity formation in Ukraine was shaped by long-term historical continuities, repeated episodes of external domination, and recurring efforts to preserve or reactivate cultural autonomy. The evidence presented in the article does not “prove” a civilizational thesis in any absolute sense, but it does make a historically grounded case that Ukrainian identity is neither derivative nor peripheral in the simple terms often used in imperial narratives.

The linguistic dimension is especially revealing because it combines long historical duration with measurable contemporary change. The Razumkov Centre data [8] suggest that language has become a stronger marker of public self-identification since 2014, while the broader literature indicates that this shift is tied to civic solidarity as much as to ethnolinguistic symbolism. Religious history complements this finding by showing that Ukraine’s confessional development cannot be captured by a simple East–West divide. Instead, it reflects a long experience of mediation, plurality, and institutional contestation.

The political and intellectual dimensions also point toward a specific mode of European embeddedness. Historical traditions of collective self-organization, together with the modern repertoire of protest and civic mobilization, help explain why democratic claims became so central in moments of crisis. Likewise, the long arc from the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy to contemporary Erasmus+ participation suggests durable engagement with European educational and intellectual networks. Artistic culture and the nineteenth-century national revival reinforce this picture by demonstrating that Ukrainian cultural production repeatedly translated European forms into locally meaningful idioms.

The comparative element of the study is important but should be interpreted carefully. Similarities with Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Finnish, Irish, and other European experiences help situate Ukraine within wider patterns of nation-building under imperial constraint, yet they do not erase the asymmetries of Ukraine’s own history. The value of the comparison therefore lies in contextualization rather than in strict equivalence.

Several limitations must also be acknowledged. First, the article is a structured synthesis based on secondary literature, public survey data, and institutional reports; it does not introduce new archival material or a dedicated original dataset. Second, the analytical tables are heuristic devices designed to clarify patterns in the literature, not exhaustive models of historical complexity. Third, the breadth of the article means that some dimensions—especially regional variation, minority experiences, and internal contestation within Ukrainian identity—could only be addressed selectively. These limitations do not invalidate the argument, but they define its appropriate scope.

5.1. DECOLONIZATION AND RETHINKING HERITAGE

The findings also have implications for current debates on decolonization. Demchuk and Levchenko [11] argue persuasively that Ukrainian art historiography must be reconsidered outside Russian-centered interpretive frameworks. This point extends beyond art history. In the fields of memory, religion, education, and political culture, the Ukrainian case has often been narrated through categories inherited from imperial or Soviet scholarship. Decolonization in this context does not mean replacing one dogma with another; it means restoring analytical proportionality to actors, institutions, and traditions that were previously subordinated in larger narratives.

The memory of the Holodomor is particularly important to this process. Applebaum [12] shows that the famine of 1932–1933 was not merely a demographic catastrophe, but also a violent assault on the social and cultural foundations of Ukrainian life. Its centrality in contemporary memory politics reflects the need to integrate historical trauma into a national narrative that is no longer filtered through Soviet silence.

Recent analyses of the Ukrainian scholarly publishing landscape similarly demonstrate that intellectual decolonization is institutional as well as symbolic. Nazarovets [31] shows that Ukrainian journals continue to function under wartime conditions while pursuing international visibility and quality standards. This persistence matters because it indicates that integration into the European academic space depends not only on external recognition, but also on the internal resilience of Ukrainian institutions.

From this perspective, the contemporary European orientation of Ukraine is best understood as a historically grounded re-centering rather than a sudden civilizational conversion. The cumulative evidence suggests continuity, adaptation, and selective transformation rather than rupture from an allegedly non-European past.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the historical and cultural foundations of Ukrainian identity through six interrelated dimensions: language, religion, political culture, artistic culture, intellectual tradition, and national revival. Considered together, these dimensions indicate that Ukrainian national consciousness was formed through long-term participation in European

cultural processes while retaining historically specific local forms. The article therefore argues not that Ukraine simply mirrors Europe, but that its historical development is intelligible within European patterns of cultural exchange, imperial contestation, and nation-building.

The analysis shows, first, that language has become an increasingly salient marker of public belonging, especially under the pressure of war and decolonizing cultural policy. Second, the religious dimension reveals a durable history of interaction between Eastern and Western Christian traditions rather than a fixed civilizational boundary. Third, political culture points to recurrent practices of self-organization and civic mobilization that became increasingly compatible with European democratic norms. Fourth, artistic production and heritage preservation demonstrate that Ukrainian culture has repeatedly adapted wider European forms into distinctive local idioms. Fifth, the intellectual tradition confirms long-standing participation in European educational and scholarly networks. Sixth, the nineteenth-century national revival followed mechanisms comparable to those seen in other European societies facing linguistic marginalization and delayed statehood.

The principal contribution of the article is the integration of these dimensions into a single interpretive framework grounded in recent scholarship and supported by selected empirical indicators. The practical significance of the study lies in clarifying why contemporary Ukrainian claims to European belonging are historically rooted rather than purely strategic. At the same time, the article has clear limits: it is based on secondary interpretation, its comparative scope is selective, and some internal regional and social variations require fuller treatment in future work.

Further research could deepen the comparative dimension through paired case studies with other Central and Eastern European nations, develop regional analyses of linguistic and religious change within Ukraine, and examine how wartime displacement and reconstruction are reshaping identity at the local level. Even with these limitations, the evidence reviewed here supports the conclusion that Ukrainian identity is best understood as a historically layered, internally dynamic, and demonstrably European formation.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to the content of this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY

All materials analyzed in this study are contained in the cited literature, public survey releases, and institutional reports. The author-compiled analytical tables and synthesis notes are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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