

# **Thirty Years Since Independence: Defining Ukraine's Strategic Culture**

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Back in the late 1980s, the so-called “second world” began falling apart. The collapse of the Berlin wall and the violent unrest that spread through the region marked the end of the Cold War and the beginning of communism's great fall. The dissolution of the Soviet Union officially confirmed with the Belovezha Accords, signified a new era of history for Eastern Europe. For the first time in a century, the fifteen constituent republics had an opportunity to create their own states and decide their own destinies. Among them, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) was one of the three primary republics pressing for independence and self-determination. This research sought to understand the ways in which Ukraine approached its independence, with a special focus on evaluating the development of a unique Ukrainian strategic culture. To answer the question of how far the state's strategic culture developed in the thirty years since Ukraine gained its independence and what are basic characteristics of it, this thesis examined the modern-day political rhetoric of Ukraine through the lens of identity, values, norms, and perception and found that a distinctly Ukrainian strategic culture while still developing is more cooperation oriented but will engage in decisive action if pushed into a corner.

By looking at a variety of sources, including but not limited to legislation, opinion polls, and interviews from before and after the conflict this research found that Ukraine's strategic culture is quickly maturing. I suggest that under threat to Ukrainian sovereignty, the state is capable of considering radical and isolationist policy, which might hurt its economic and social

pursuits, to protect itself from the perceived threat. Their willingness to fight for independence, and their resistance to cultural integration, conveys that state sovereignty is a major strategic priority, not necessarily state cohesiveness. Although Ukraine would be unlikely to follow a strategy that would undermine the power invested at the top of the pyramid, and further decision-makers would act to reinforce these positions, the Ukrainian strategy is largely positive towards international cooperation, especially if cooperation contributes to the achievement of other objectives. Ukraine's norms dictate a consideration for the reputation and image of the state; as such, Ukraine is unlikely to go 'rogue' or to pursue an extremist strategy, instead it will seek to minimize threats to the state instead of facing them outright. However, recent trends further indicate that Ukraine in the future is increasingly more likely to view itself as masculine and Ukrainian strategy will be more prone to military engagement and decisive action.

The significance of this research is twofold. For one, establishing an understanding of a state's approaches to strategy allows one to anticipate state actions in the future. In the great scheme of things having a somewhat accurate predictor for the potential actions of a state allows to establish an understanding of potential danger zones and conflict triggers, as well as to create an opportunity for preemptive intervention. Further, the study of specifically Ukrainian strategic culture is significant due to Ukraine's geographical location and uncertain international affiliation. By reaching a greater understanding of Ukrainian strategic culture, the academic community can inform the best course of action for stabilizing the relationship between Russia and Ukraine with the hope to achieve peace in the region, as well as devise a path to further incorporate Ukraine into the greater international space.

Few theoretical works exist on the topic and previous academic papers struggled to provide a detailed account of the factors which might contribute to the overall strategic outcomes

and create a well-rounded understanding of the Ukrainian strategic culture. Their shortcomings were twofold, they derived the definition from the 2014 conflict between Russia and Ukraine and chose to primarily focus on Russia and its role as the aggressor. I propose that while the existence of the 2014 conflict has without a doubt fast-forwarded the study of Ukraine's strategic culture, the fact that the Russia-Ukraine War has so far been Ukraine's only significant external conflict has led the current understanding of Ukraine's strategic culture to over-emphasize the specific concerns of this war within the definition as a whole. The conflict undermined Ukraine's sovereignty over its territory when Russia lay claim on the Crimean Peninsula and raised questions over the cultural division present in Ukraine when citizens of Eastern Ukraine showed considerable support for the presence of Russian troops inside the eastern Ukrainian borders. Consequently, the Ukrainian strategic response has been centered on addressing these issues and influenced the existing conclusions made on the topic of Ukrainian strategic culture. As a result, works such as the "Mutuality of Political Culture with Strategic State Priorities" by I.A. Shtuka and "Europe's Strategic Culture and Security Challenges for Ukraine" by Nataliya Kryvoruchko over-estimate the desires for geographical dominance and cultural cohesion as the main goals of Ukraine's strategy.

Secondly, other works on the topic primarily focus on Russia and defining its influence on Ukraine. While these considerations are necessary, such studies largely overlook Ukraine as an independent actor and allocate it to a passive role within the conflict. This perception leaves the understanding of Ukraine incomplete and continues the harmful narrative of viewing Ukraine's existence as contingent on Russia's. Ukraine, although a young country, had come a long way to achieve freedom from the neighboring states, and denying Ukraine its agency is

widely inaccurate. This research sought to shift the focus to Ukraine and analyze the specifics of its conduct and motivations.

This thesis uses the concept of strategic culture defined by Jack Snyder in 1977 as “the sum total of ideas, conditional emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of the national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and shared with each other, with regard to [...] strategy” in his “The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options” (Snyder, pg.8). This definition connects the concepts of national culture and strategy, placing the unified notion of strategic culture as a lens through which decision-makers can arrive at strategic decisions. Using Jack Snyder’s definition, this research sought to create an intersectional understanding of Ukrainian approaches to strategy. Further, this research used a framework developed by Jeannie Johnson in her work “Strategic Culture: Refining the Theoretical Construct.”. Johnson suggests that the research should begin at the national level of analysis, and the first step should be the discussion of a national culture of a country. To do so, the model outlines four key factors: identity, values, norms, and perception. These factors are especially useful for each has a “specific security dimension,” and each can be viewed as “security-related outputs of national culture” (Johnson, pg.14-15).

Identity can be an indicator of strategic culture, in that while realism presents state actors as acting in their own rational interest, the state’s view of itself and its ideas of its destiny can alter the state’s perceptions of rational choice. As such, it is important to consider strategic culture analysis as coming from the “assumption that states may have diverse goals based on a normative understanding of who they are, and what role they should be playing” (Johnson, pg.11). An analysis of values hints at strategic choices and priorities within a country. Norms, defined as the acceptable and expected types of behavior, highlight certain choices a state might

bypass. Lastly, the perceptive lens deals with the interpretive nature of politics. A state's "perception of facts" like "of own histories, of image abroad, of what motivates others, of the capabilities of our leadership, and of the national resources available" all can skew the considerations of appropriate and rational strategy (Johnson, pg.13). This paper applied the model outlined by Johnson to Ukraine as a particular case study of national strategic culture. The data and findings of this research unearthed an understanding of the four variables listed above, in policy, interviews, and opinion polls, to answer the main question of whether Ukraine had developed an independent strategic culture and what its characteristics are.

### **Data and findings:**

This research was divided into four parts each one corresponding to the four factors of national culture: identity, values, norms, and perception. For evaluating each variable, I came up with a specific approach, one which conformed to the most relevant definition of the factor and one for which evidence from Ukraine was present in a sufficient quantity for a conclusion to be drawn.

The study on identity was twofold, the first part of the research focused on examining the course of Ukraine's language legislation and the second dealt with scrutinizing Ukrainian currency, and from there, two main factors of national identity became evident. For one, Ukraine uses language as a tool for distinguishing Ukrainian identity from that of the assimilated Soviet and the foreign Russian identity. Early-day language legislation in Ukraine aimed at establishing the primacy of the Ukrainian language in order to rebuild a cohesive Ukrainian identity. The acceleration of the language legislation around the time that the 2014 armed conflict broke out and the change of attitudes towards ratifying Russian as the second language indicates that Ukrainians view language as intrinsic to their identity. A comparison of opinion polls suggests a

rising defensiveness among Ukrainian speakers. To the question of “granting Russian the status of an equal state language” in 2002, 40% of respondents agreed, and 39% “said it would be appropriate to give it access to the official circuit following the wish expressed by local communities,” and only 17% said it should be entirely removed from this circuit” (Olszański pg. 24). On the other hand, the 2020 survey results indicate that 66% of Ukrainians “agree that the Russian language in Ukraine can be freely used in private life, but Ukrainian should remain the only official national language,” 18% believe the Russian language should have official status in some regions, and only 13% were in favor of making a national language (*The Ukrainian Language*). Furthermore, the 2020 poll indicates that over 70% of Ukrainians think that the “Ukrainian language is an important component of Ukraine's independence” (*The Ukrainian Language*). All of the evidence seems to point at the importance of language for national identity and the perceived challenge to that identity presented by minority languages. Moreover, the research into the language legislation suggests that under threat to Ukrainian sovereignty, the state is capable of considering radical and isolationist policy, which might hurt its economic and social pursuits, to protect itself from the perceived threat.

Further, the examination of the currency portraits and their use as tools of cultural reinforcement indicates the Ukrainian desire to reconstruct its previous identity, one before the Russification and integration of Ukraine into the Soviet narrative. The emphasis on the leaders of the preceding Ukrainian states, their willingness to fight for independence, and their resistance to cultural integration, conveys that state sovereignty is a major strategic priority, not necessarily state cohesiveness.

In the conversation about the value scale of Ukraine, this research relied on the framework proposed by Shalom Schwartz and sought to find answers to his three common

societal questions. On the question as to conservatism versus autonomy, the research assessed polls into the topics of cultural traditions and religion. In 2020, 32 percent of Ukrainians responded well to reforms that ban the use of communist symbols, 30 percent “approve of renaming of their cities, villages, and streets named after Soviet leaders,” and 34 percent “support the condemnation of the USSR as a communist totalitarian regime that pursued a policy of state terror” which presents a significant increase in anti-Soviet sentiment in the past decade (The Sixth Year of Decommunization). Overall, Ukrainians presented as open-minded towards political reform, yet overall, remain largely socially conservative, with 72 percent of people identifying themselves as religious in 2018 and other social rigidity remaining present.

Concerning the upholding of the social structure via hierarchy or egalitarianism, the study of Ukraine's government system and the resulting flaws, such as corruption, indicated a strong pattern of hierarchical values. Cases of corruption in Ukraine vary from ‘minute’ and normalized like bribes given to teachers (35% of bribes given) and medical providers (51%), to significant and disruptive like government (15%) and law enforcement (11%) bribing (Corruption in the Everyday Lives of Ukrainians). However, despite acknowledging the existing problem of corruption, few Ukrainians are willing to make changes themselves. While 73 percent said they would refuse to give a bribe, merely 19 percent were willing to report to law enforcement, 17 percent would report to the media, and 13 percent said they would not do anything.

Lastly, the results from the opinion polls on environmental issues were characteristic of a mastery approach to nature, yet some dissonance between the values held and the values acted upon was present. This inconsistency most likely means that Ukrainian values are still not rigid and are undergoing a transition; therefore, it will take time to create the norms of behavior to reinforce these new values.

Overall, the results pinpoint a certain disconnect between the values presented as important in the Ukrainian society and the values associated with the actions taken in the society; this effect is perhaps due to the transitioning state of Ukraine’s value system. Placing Ukraine on

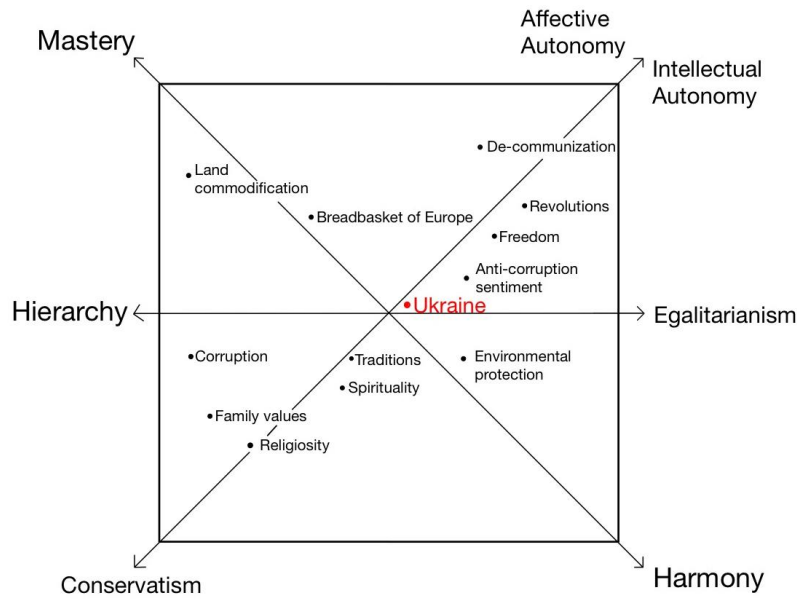


Figure 1 Placing Ukraine on Schwartz's scale of value type

the Schwartz scale of value types, the most consistent values seem to be exhibited between conservatism and autonomy. Here Ukrainians prove to be politically reformative, seeking to redesign Ukrainian politics and erase the stains of communism through reforms and revolution. Still, socially Ukrainians seem to be more conservative, placing a high value on family, religion, and tradition. These findings seem to place Ukraine at medium conservatism with leanings towards both intellectual and affective autonomy, meaning that Ukrainian strategy would not be deterred by decisions that would subject the country to political reform, such as joining a trade union, but would be hesitant to disrupt the existing social order. In the remaining categories, the dissonance is much more significant. Regarding hierarchy versus egalitarianism, most people recognize corruption as a negative practice, and a trait of the current power dynamic yet choose



to do little to promote a more egalitarian distribution of power. Due to the persistent hierarchical structure and the corruption of decision-makers, Ukraine would be unlikely to follow a strategy that would undermine the power invested at the top of the pyramid, and further decision-makers would act to reinforce these positions. Lastly, mastery of nature seems to be the default setting inherited by Ukraine; although most people acknowledge environmental concerns and the commodification of nature, they fail to act on it. The environmental protection that Ukrainians do engage in seems to have little to do with actual concern for nature and more with a cost-benefit analysis and economization of resources, and Ukraine would be unlikely to prioritize environmental concerns in its strategy.

The examination of Ukrainian political norms involved research into the history of Ukrainian treaties. Two treaties were selected for consideration, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which Ukraine abided by, and the signed treaty to join the Commonwealth of the Independent States, which Ukraine reneged on. By complying with a costly NPT agreement but dismissing an economically profitable trade union opportunity Ukraine demonstrated a certain set of political norms which carry implications for Ukrainian strategy. For one, the Ukrainian strategy is largely positive towards cooperation, especially if cooperation contributes to the achievement of other objectives. Ukraine's norms dictate a consideration for the reputation and image of the state; as such, Ukraine is unlikely to go 'rogue' or to pursue an extremist strategy. Secondly, Ukrainian norms once again highlight the importance of independence and dictate that Ukrainian strategy will seek to minimize threats to the state instead of facing them outright.

The last section on perception used a combination of interviews and state myths to assess the existing stereotypes of Ukraine. Among the most dominant foreign perceptions of the state was that of Ukraine as feminine and passive, the competing narrative introduced by Ukraine

itself aimed at counteracting these hetero-stereotypes with images of masculinity. Ukraine emphasizes the role of the militaristic Cossacks in its history with hopes to create a new state myth and change self-perception. Due to the changing narrative and auto-stereotypes, Ukraine in the future is more likely to view itself as masculine and Ukrainian strategy will be more prone to military engagement and decisive action.

### **Conclusion:**

The state of Ukraine had a long and troubled history filled with foreign occupation and forced assimilation, which significantly undermined the development of nationalist movements and Ukraine's path to independence. Upon finally achieving independence at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ukraine still faced significant challenges to its identity, which made it a struggle for the newly developed state to find its footing in the international arena and to develop its strategic approaches. Now, however, after experiencing two revolutions and being in the midst of an ongoing international war, Ukraine has passed into a new stage of maturity and is capable of developing a strong strategic stance. The examination of key factors of national culture revealed several interesting conclusions as to the aspects of the Ukrainian strategic culture which align with Ukraine's observed behaviors. For example, Yanukovich attempting to pursue self-interested policy in 2013 by refusing the E.U. deal is an indicator of the hierarchical values influencing the strategic decisions of Ukraine. Also, Ukraine's active engagement in the Donbas war, as opposed to submission to the Kremlin's demands, indicates Ukraine's willingness to engage in military action and to pursue decisive, sovereignty-reinforcing tactics as a result of changing self-perception. Although Ukraine's values and norms are still evolving and the state's strategic culture is likely to change in the future, Ukraine has come a long way since independence and presents clear state priorities and predictable strategy patterns.

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