

Putin's Illusions and Ukraine's Reality: Myth vs Westward Integration

Written by Alexandros Koutsoukis, Myroslava Lendel, Antonina Bulyna, Grace Evans and Olha Borysenko

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In a recent interview with journalist Tucker Carlson, Putin expressed his belief in the eventual reconciliation between Ukraine and Russia, suggesting a healing of ties between the two nations. While this may seem reassuring to those who interpret Putin as interested in peace-building through agreements akin to Sèvres, Yalta or Sykes-Picot for power sharing with the West (see question 8'29''-8'54''), it actually underscores Putin's intransigence. He appears solely focused on negotiations between the USA and Russia, challenging the liberal international order and its principle of sovereign equality. His unwavering belief that Ukrainians will inevitably reconcile with 'fate' in the face of a stronger enemy reveals the depth of his illusions as people reconcile with the enemy or come to terms with defeat not simply because time passes by, but rather due to the development of respectful ways of rebuilding their relations.

A closer examination of the changes in Ukraine's symbols and cultural identity, alongside the deepening integration of Ukrainian civil society with the West and the EU, the advancement of international donor coordination efforts, the implementation of humanist policies in Ukrainian universities, and the resettlement of Ukrainian refugees in Western countries like the UK suggests that the world Putin envisions cannot be restored. His concept of reconciliation appears superficial and self-deceptive.

Putin may have anticipated a swift occupation of Ukraine akin to Crimea likely driven by his belief in prevailing pro-Russian sentiments among certain segments of the Ukrainian population and the fear instilled by the Russian military machine. However, his perspective, clouded by his adherence to a flawed state ideology and civilisational nationalist vision, prevented him from fully recognising Ukraine's gradual drift away from Russia, partly due to his own actions. Additionally, Putin's misplaced confidence in the power of the "fifth column" within Ukraine, comprising insignificant politicians and officials, to facilitate a smooth transition in the event of an invasion, proved to be misguided. These miscalculations further underscored his misunderstanding of Ukrainian aspirations for independence and sovereignty, leading to a rallying of diverse political figures against Moscow's Eurasian influence in the aftermath of Russia's military aggression. No wonder that for Putin the hearts and minds of people point in one direction: Russia.

While Putin's vision remains rooted in the past, Ukraine's progressive distancing from Russia and its increasing integration with the West present a stark contrast. This shift is evident in Ukraine's active disengagement from Russian influence in various spheres, including linguistic practices, religion, cultural ties, and historical narratives. Despite Putin's emphasis on the nebulous notion of the soul of the Russian nation as pivotal in linking Ukraine and Russia, recent events highlight the divergence between the two nations. Although it is still possible to initiate numerous conversations in Russian in the streets of Ukrainian cities, a significant number of Ukrainian citizens, who previously had minimal usage of the Ukrainian language until February 24, 2022, have now completely transitioned to using it in public communication. President Zelensky's decision to revise the calendar used for religious holidays, aligning it more closely with some Western and Eastern Orthodox traditions, is reinforcing Ukraine's orientation toward the West, while further undermining its ties with Russia.

Putin's response to Tucker Carlson regarding his invasion of Ukraine, framed within the context of Russia's long-term state-formation process, illustrates his differing perspective: "Why are the Ukrainian authorities dismantling the

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Ukrainian Orthodox Church? Because it brings together not only the territory. It brings together our souls. No one will be able to separate the soul.” While Putin sees the Russian-Ukrainian soul as inseparable, for Ukrainians, these symbols are losing their significance in their collective consciousness. The dismantling of the monument of Russo-Ukrainian friendship, emblematic of a bygone era, signals Ukraine’s trajectory toward greater autonomy and sovereignty, and embracing a revamped cultural identity.

As Ukraine’s civil society increasingly integrates with the West and the EU, its alignment with Western values and institutions has deepened over time, spurred by historical events and accelerated by Russia’s invasion. The Orange Revolution (2004-2005) and especially the Maidan Uprising (2013) played pivotal roles in fostering a pro-Western civil society and state orientation. This momentum has only intensified in the wake of Russia’s aggression. A nationwide Ukrainian poll conducted in March 2022 revealed a significant surge in support for EU accession, reaching a record high of 91% by the end of that month. Zelensky’s formal application for EU accession in February 2022, followed by the granting of candidate status in June 2022 and the subsequent EU decision to open accession negotiations in December 2023, underscore Ukraine’s strong commitment to Western integration. Despite the tragic toll of the invasion, Putin’s vision for the future of the bilateral relationship is losing traction given Ukraine’s resolute march toward the West.

The invasion of Ukraine has also triggered a robust response from the West, resulting in the dispatch of military aid and the establishment of initiatives such as the International Donor Coordination Centre (IDCC) and the EU’s Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC). These efforts highlight the deepening interconnectedness between Ukraine and the West. However, communication gaps within these mechanisms hinder optimal aid distribution, necessitating further efforts to streamline humanitarian assistance delivery. Despite these challenges, and provided the Western aid continues to flow, the ongoing conflict will likely continue to reinforce Ukraine’s integration in the Western system.

Ukrainian universities, crucial in shaping civil society, are also at the forefront of Ukraine’s integration with the West on the basis of humanist principles. Recognising the value of human interconnectedness, the internationalisation of higher education has been instrumental in fostering flourishing societies, prioritising diversity, equity, and inclusion. Uzhhorod National University (UzhNU), for instance, champions human rights and democracy, exemplified by recent projects such as the COIL project “Small Group Collaboration Using the Principles of Nonviolent Communication”, which was integrated in the elective course “Nonviolent Communication” with the incorporation of literary texts (2022), and “Epistemologies of Inclusion through Continents and Cultures” (2023).

These initiatives allow students from different parts of the world to interact and learn how to build peaceful ties, reflecting Ukrainian universities’ commitment to human dignity. They stand in stark contrast to Russian authorities’ efforts to eradicate liberal ideas from university curricula. They highlight the unique role of higher education institutions in cultivating global citizenship, when they engage in projects that nurture globally-minded individuals and communities, even in the course of this war.

As this article delineates the evolving dynamics between Ukraine and Russia, the personal account provided by one of its co-authors, Olha Borysenko, offers a glimpse into the lived experiences of Ukrainians amidst the ongoing conflict. Her story serves as a microcosm of the broader narrative of Ukraine’s Westward integration, shedding light on the challenges, resilience, and aspirations of its people in the face of adversity.

In February 2022, like many other Ukrainians, my life changed drastically. Seeking a safe environment for my daughter and mother, I accepted a proposal from my British friend to reside in her house as required by the *Ukrainian Sponsorship Scheme*. After living there for six months, we eventually rented our own apartment.

My first impressions of England were incredible, as I had never been here before. Everything everywhere was unusual—different from Ukraine. Additionally, my experience proved that local people are amiable and open. If I needed anything, I could ask anyone, and in 100 % of the cases, I received helpful advice. However, adapting to the daily routines and administrative processes posed challenges, such as navigating application processes, completing forms, and communicating with public authorities. Despite this, the availability of comprehensive information, even in

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Ukrainian or Russian, on the state website *gov.uk* proved invaluable; an example Ukraine should follow. Moreover, the substantial Ukrainian community in my area, where I personally know more than 500 Ukrainians only in the nearest towns and villages, provided a sense of familiarity and support.

Nevertheless, the longing for our homeland remains strong among many of us, with some even returning to Ukraine to highly unsafe areas due to this longing. Overall, while I appreciate the hospitality of the British, successful assimilation requires flexibility and a willingness to adapt to new traditions and regulations, even if they differ from those of our native country. As for me, organising household processes and everyday life was not as complicated as the desire to return home.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, following eight years of hybrid warfare, marks a critical juncture not only for the involved parties but also for the broader international community. While the conflict in Ukraine underscores the regional, national, and human challenges posed by Russia's aggression, its significance extends beyond regional dynamics. By flouting international norms and treaties, Russia seeks to undermine the existing order and diminish the influence of Euro-Atlantic and Western actors. Ukraine's resilience in the face of aggression has prompted states and societies worldwide to confront their perceptions of the Russian regime and its aggressive policies. Ukraine's resistance, notwithstanding its military inferiority to Russia, serves as a powerful demonstration to Western nations and the world that shared values and a valiant commitment to a just cause can help countries come together.

Amidst the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, the imperative of delineating acceptable conduct in international relations becomes apparent, presenting an opportunity for states to rebuild strategic stability and global cooperation. The gradual awakening to Russian aggressiveness offers the West a unique chance to rebuild its legitimacy and shape international order in ways that are less hypocritical and more solidarist, potentially resonating with countries of the Global South and the BRICs. This conflict also serves as a stark reminder that great powers ought to heed evolving societal dynamics and think twice before resorting to reactionary measures that try to impede significant social transformations like Ukraine's Westward integration.

While Putin may cling to the illusion of eventual reconciliation between Ukraine and Russia, the imperative of understanding the intricate social dynamics underlying violence today and historically remains paramount. This understanding is not only vital for ending conflicts but also for embracing the often overlooked and underestimated imperative of reconciliation, crucial for lasting peace.

About the author:

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