



Ukrainian Domestic Politics and Identity: How Has the War Changed Ukraine?

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When I began this piece, Russia and Ukraine were reportedly in another round of negotiations. It appeared that Russia was withdrawing its troops from Kyiv. The reports of a Russian withdrawal were accurate. Still, as I rewrite this piece, the day the world learned of the Russian massacre of civilians in Bucha, it is more difficult to imagine how this war will change Ukrainian domestic politics and identity. I cannot deny that these recent revelations have shaped my thinking.

Domestic Politics

The Russian war in Ukraine has caused fundamental shifts in Ukraine's domestic politics. As the possibility of a Russian invasion from the [east increased daily in late January and February](#), Ukrainians were driven closer to domestic political unity than ever since declaring independence in 1991. Before this latest phase of the war started in 2022, Ukraine's major domestic political issues included: anti-corruption measures and the [fight against the oligarchs](#), [national healthcare reform](#), [the COVID-19 pandemic](#), and the conflict in the [Donbas basin](#). Beyond these significant issues, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was trying to regain his national popularity after his [Servant of the People Party underperformed](#) in Ukraine's 2020 local and regional elections. The war has significantly upended or exacerbated many of these issues.

Fighting Corruption, Arresting Poroshenko, and Zelenskyy's Popularity

Anti-corruption measures were critical for the political and economic success of post-Euromaidan Ukraine. Ukraine's [Western partners demanded the government root out corruption](#), and Zelenskyy seemed to flounder in this quest. In December 2021, [his administration failed to name a chief prosecutor](#) for anti-corruption due to pressure from various civil society groups who feared that whoever was chosen would serve Zelenskyy rather than carry out corruption prosecutions.

In this vein, former Ukrainian President [Petro Poroshenko returned to Ukraine](#) to face treason charges levied against him by Zelenskyy's administration. In an unpopular move, [Zelenskyy's administration accused Poroshenko](#) of selling coal to pro-Russian separatists in the occupied Donbas region during his presidency (2015-2019). However, the war has changed Poroshenko's situation. Far from facing arrest and court hearings in Kyiv, the boisterous Poroshenko has once again become a leading political figure. He's been filmed for interviews in combat gear as he has taken up arms to defend Ukraine. He is a leading [Ukrainian voice in Western media](#) about the impact of the Russian military invasion and the devastation it has wrought in Kyiv. He uses his five-year-long clash with Vladimir Putin during his presidency to argue that Ukraine should never trust Russian overtures for negotiations.

Poroshenko's popularity and leadership during the war make him the biggest threat to Zelenskyy's re-election in 2024, but predicting a 2024 electoral season is premature.

On the other hand, opposition party leader and oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk has seen a stark change in his position. In 2020, his "Opposition Platform-for Life" Party was more popular than Zelenskyy's. However, his close ties to Putin and his pro-Russian stances have cost him dearly. In May 2021, [Medvedchuk was arrested and placed under house arrest](#) under treason charges, and, in February 2021, his assets were frozen. Three pro-Russian television channels that supported his party were also shut down. Medvedchuk [fled](#) his house arrest after the war began, but was arrested again on April 12.

Finally, there is Zelenskyy himself. Besides the unpopular and politically motivated charges against Poroshenko, Zelenskyy's [popularity in 2021](#) was a fraction of what it was during his [landslide electoral win in 2019](#). Even in late 2021, as the threat of Russian invasion grew, Zelenskyy and his Servant of the People Party faced opposition. Throughout January 2022 and early February 2022, there were concerns in the West and Ukraine that [he was not taking the Russian threat seriously](#). However, since the invasion began, Zelenskyy has proven to be an effective and inspiring wartime leader. Zelenskyy's daily addresses to Ukrainians and the international community have garnered him praise and support across the globe. As war appeared more imminent, [Ukrainians](#) and [the Ukrainian diaspora](#) were more united

There are major questions facing

Ukrainian domestic politics. How can Zelenskyy's administration continue its fight against corruption? How will further arrests or charges levied against pro-Russian politicians be perceived? And most important, will/can elections occur during wartime? War changes governing calculus. Arresting and charging pro-Russian and pro-Kremlin Ukrainian politicians with treason is much more palatable now than it was a few months ago because the brutality of the Russian military impacts every Ukrainian.

Moreover, [nearly 4 million Ukrainians](#) have sought refuge in Ukraine's European neighbors, and millions more are internally displaced. This humanitarian crisis will have long-term effects on Ukrainian domestic politics as demographics such as women, children, the elderly, and other groups who were not subject to military enlistment fled the country. Additionally, Ukraine has not [carried out a successful census](#) since 2001—before the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan. It is difficult to predict change in domestic politics given the unprecedented destruction and displacement. Ukraine will have to recover physically, economically, and demographically. We cannot read the tea leaves of 1991 Ukraine, the 2004 Orange Revolution, or the 2014 Euromaidan to gauge possibilities for Ukraine post-2022 invasion.

Ukrainian Cultural and National Unity

In contrast, the war has made it easier to see the multitude of changes in Ukraine in terms of national and cultural identity. Following the 2014 Euromaidan protests, Russia's forced annexation of Crimea, and its support of pro-Russian forces in the

Donbas, Ukrainian support for pro-Russian policies and cultural modes waned. In joint research with Russia's Levada Center, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) conducted a [survey of Ukrainian attitudes](#) toward Russia in February 2021. After a slight growth in positive attitudes toward Russia in 2018, a sharp dip continued into the winter of 2021. Two of the clearest examples of the change in sentiment are in the realms of language policies and religion.

In 2019, the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's Parliament, [adopted a law](#) that established Ukrainian as the only language of the Ukrainian state. This law focused on promoting and preserving Ukrainian for state employees in their public capacities and set a standard of proficiency in Ukrainian. While the legislation establishes Ukrainian as the language of instruction for schools, it also allows for the language of national minorities of Ukraine to learn that language along with Ukrainian.

Data from another KIIS survey in [February 2021](#) shows that nearly 60% of Ukrainians supported the language law, with most of the support coming from the western and central regions of the country and with the least support coming from the east at only 38.8%. Moreover, the survey showed that more than half of respondents use either a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian at home or use either language depending on the situation. However, since the war began, across various social media channels, Ukrainians who speak Russian have sworn it off and are dedicating themselves to speaking only Ukrainian.

Religion has also played a definitive role

in Ukrainian identity since 1991. In 2018, [the Ukrainian Orthodox Church split](#) from its Russian counterpart and established its autocephalous church, ending an over 300-year-old connection between the Orthodox churches of both countries. The split was deeply unpopular in the Kremlin, with both Putin and Russian Patriarch Kirill deriding the decision of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to recognize the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as independent from Russia. The decision is not surprising when one considers the closeness of church and state in Russia, with Patriarch Kirill voicing support for the Russian annexation of Crimea. Since the Russian war in Ukraine began in February, the Russian Orthodox Church leadership has been [vocal in its support](#) for Putin's "special operation." The feelings of connection that the Ukrainian Orthodox community held toward their Russian co-religionists have most likely disappeared. In a twist of irony, Russia has bombed dozens of Ukrainian places of worship, including a [Russian Orthodox church in Kharkiv](#).

Concluding Thoughts

While everything is in flux in Ukraine, it is too early to predict how this war will change Ukrainian domestic politics and cultural identity. Ukraine has been in conflict since 2014, as the war in Donbas took over 13,000 lives before the beginning of the war in 2022. Zelenskyy's fight against the oligarchs, execution of Poroshenko-era language policies, and competition against the opposition were in their early stages.

As Ukraine continues to fight one of the world's largest militaries, each revelation of Russian war crimes and each video of a

Russian celebrity touting the Russian “special operation” pushes Ukrainians toward an anti-Russian brand of Ukrainian nationalism. Russia and Ukraine have been linked for centuries, and while Putin has manipulated this history to suit his murderous ends, these ties are real.

Nevertheless, we are witnessing the destruction of these bonds and the widening of the chasm between the two countries—between the Western political order and subservience to Putin’s dictatorial regime. This is the great irony of Putin’s war in Ukraine. He framed this war to preserve the rights and autonomy of Russian speakers in Ukraine. He has characterized Ukrainian sovereignty and autonomy as Soviet-era mistakes. Yet, his invasion has affected all Ukrainians, no matter their language, faith, and ethnicity. Now, Ukraine is united in this existential conflict against a singular enemy, Vladimir Putin, and his henchmen.