



REVIEW

Exploring contemporary socio-cultural shifts in Ukraine and their effects on strengthening national identity and resilience in times of war

Explorando los cambios socioculturales contemporáneos en Ucrania y sus efectos en el fortalecimiento de la identidad nacional y la resiliencia en tiempos de Guerra

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ABSTRACT

Establishing a Ukrainian political nation is contingent upon a complex set of circumstances. Ukraine is compelled to wage a war against Russia for its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. In such times, national self-identification becomes pivotal in consolidating efforts across all resistance fronts. The formation of Ukrainian identity is complicated by the dichotomy within Ukraine’s socio-cultural space, where Russian culture, alongside Ukrainian, has had significant influence. Russia’s full-scale aggression has facilitated the ultimate dissolution of Russian influence on the self-identification of Ukrainians. This article aims to identify the main socio-cultural trends that influence the transformation of national identity and resilience in Ukraine. Constructivism serves as the principal methodological approach to the research, enabling the analysis of the critical elements of national identity during its formation and development. The research methods include document analysis and sociological data, case studies, comparison, synthesis, deduction, generalisation, and systematisation. The findings of the research indicate that the war has significantly impacted the self-identification processes of Ukrainians, hastening the decolonisation of Ukraine’s socio-cultural space. Ukrainians are creating distance from Russian influences, including its culture and cultural outputs like music, literature, and cinema. There is a notable shift towards the use of the Ukrainian language and the gradual adoption of Ukrainian and European symbols over Russian ones. These changes are fostering a more robust national identity, enhancing the societal aspect of this identity, and catalysing a shift from feelings of inferiority to a rise in national pride and patriotism.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural Processes; National Identity; Nation; Resilience; Russian-Ukrainian War.

RESUMEN

El establecimiento de una nación política ucraniana depende de un complejo conjunto de circunstancias. Ucrania se ve obligada a librar una guerra contra Rusia por su independencia, soberanía e integridad territorial. En esos tiempos, la autoidentificación nacional se vuelve fundamental para consolidar los esfuerzos

en todos los frentes de resistencia. La formación de la identidad ucraniana se complica por la dicotomía dentro del espacio sociocultural de Ucrania, donde la cultura rusa, junto con la ucraniana, ha tenido una influencia significativa. La agresión a gran escala de Rusia ha facilitado la disolución definitiva de la influencia rusa en la autoidentificación de los ucranianos. Este artículo tiene como objetivo identificar las principales tendencias socioculturales que influyen en la transformación de la identidad nacional y la resiliencia en Ucrania. El constructivismo sirve como principal enfoque metodológico de la investigación, permitiendo el análisis de los elementos críticos de la identidad nacional durante su formación y desarrollo. Los métodos de investigación incluyen análisis de documentos y datos sociológicos, estudios de casos, comparación, síntesis, deducción, generalización y sistematización. Los hallazgos de la investigación indican que la guerra ha impactado significativamente los procesos de autoidentificación de los ucranianos, acelerando la descolonización del espacio sociocultural de Ucrania. Los ucranianos se están distanciando de las influencias rusas, incluida su cultura y sus productos culturales como la música, la literatura y el cine. Hay un cambio notable hacia el uso del idioma ucraniano y la adopción gradual de símbolos ucranianos y europeos sobre los rusos. Estos cambios están fomentando una identidad nacional más sólida, mejorando el aspecto social de esta identidad y catalizando un cambio de sentimientos de inferioridad a un aumento del orgullo nacional y el patriotismo.

Palabras clave: Procesos Socioculturales; Identidad Nacional; Nación; Resiliencia; Guerra Ruso-Ucraniana.

INTRODUCTION

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, initiated in 2014, has profoundly influenced Ukraine's sense of nationhood. Ukrainians increasingly see themselves as a cohesive entity, prepared to defend against external threats and preserve their sovereignty. The war has dissolved many contradictions that previously divided society, strengthened internal unity, and prompted a re-evaluation of collective identity, catalysing the creation of a political nation.

Russia's assertive imperial policy, which consistently seeks to subordinate Ukraine, ignoring its national aspirations, further complicates these relations. Russian propaganda attempts to deny Ukrainian identity by promoting the concept of a single Russian-Ukrainian nation. At the same time, Ukrainians demonstrate their resilience and heroic struggle, demonstrating their independence and ability to defend their state borders.

The cultural aspect of this struggle is essential, as Russia's informational and cultural space has influenced Ukraine for many years. It is part of the Kremlin's hybrid warfare. The war has radically changed the Ukrainian attitude towards Russia, Russians, and the Russian language and culture, which have been tools for spreading the Kremlin's imperial narratives.

The processes of decommunisation, which commenced at the outset of the conflict in 2014, and derussification, which gained new significance following the full-scale invasion in 2022, are significantly transforming Ukraine's symbolic and mental spaces. These processes are influencing the contemporary socio-cultural changes in the country, reinforcing national resilience and fostering the growth of national self-awareness among Ukrainians.

Many theorists have long been interested in the formation and development of national identity. Analysing this matter requires understanding the concept of "nation." Primordialism approaches the nation from a biological perspective, considering it a result of the evolution of ethnicity based on cultural and/or religious kinship. Conversely, constructivism views the nation as a cultural-social-political construct.⁽¹⁾

Ernest Gellner⁽²⁾ defines a nation as an amalgamation of human beliefs and solidarity, uniting people in a common culture. Iryna Kresina⁽³⁾ suggests that a nation is characterised by a community of individuals connected not merely by ethnic ties but also by political unity, an affinity for a specific territory with its unique statehood, shared legal status, cultural practices, and historical customs.

Smith considers national identity a complex and multidimensional construct that is constantly evolving. The fundamental components of national identity encompass a traditional homeland, collective myths, a standard historical narrative, cultural unity, equal rights and duties among community members, and an integrated economy.⁽⁴⁾ In his work, Shulman identifies ten components that comprise national identity. These include ethnic identity (defined by race and origin), cultural identity (traditions, religion, language), and civic identity, which encompasses shared citizenship, territory, adherence to a particular ideology, legitimacy of power, and the desire of a citizen to be part of the nation.⁽⁵⁾

The various definitions of national identity acknowledge the pivotal role of socio-cultural factors in shaping and evolving national identity. Larrain⁽⁶⁾ suggests that national culture is an interactive realm of diverse cultural facets underpinned by national values, language, symbols, and political entities. Consequently, national identity is dynamic, comprising shifting patterns and values that necessitate periodic re-evaluation in light of historical legacies, present-day exigencies, and aspirations for the future.⁽⁷⁾

In Ukraine's scholarly dialogue, national identity is explored from multiple perspectives. Nahorna⁽⁸⁾ examines the relationship between national identity and the national ethos, addressing fundamental questions about the nation's purpose and preferred values. Rudakevych⁽⁹⁾ links national ideologies with cultural norms, suggesting that national values intrinsic to national culture lay the groundwork for national identity construction. Reznik⁽¹⁰⁾ notes the emergence of a new collective identity, with a particular emphasis on its civic component, as a consequence of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Horinov and Drapushko⁽¹¹⁾ posit that national identity is a fundamental pillar of state security, uniting society's diverse factions in the face of war.

The concept of "national resilience" is debated due to its intricacies. Folke⁽¹²⁾ defines resilience as society's capability to adapt and counteract threats.

An Israeli-Canadian study interprets "national resilience" as the nation's defence against security threats, rooted in aspects of identity such as patriotism, societal solidarity, historical insight, and cultural uniqueness.⁽¹³⁾ Consequently, despite extensive research, the impact of Ukraine's socio-cultural shifts on the progression of its national identity and fortification of its national resilience amid warfare remains an area ripe for in-depth analysis.

This study, therefore, seeks to scrutinise the socio-cultural dynamics and trends spurred by the war in Ukraine and assess their influence on enhancing the nation's identity and resilience.

METHOD

As a methodological approach, constructivism allows for an in-depth analysis of national identity as a construct susceptible to change under various socio-cultural factors. Applying this approach in our research has facilitated an understanding of the mechanisms and processes shaping and transforming national identity in the context of social change, particularly under the conditions of armed conflict.⁽¹⁴⁾

The research approach included examining documents and reviewing sociological studies, which facilitated the mapping out of critical elements and notable developments in the dynamics of Ukrainian identity amidst war. Insightful and current information for this analysis was sourced from sociological polls by entities like the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, and the Rating Group.^(15,16,17,18)

The research process also incorporated detailed case analyses, enabling a thorough exploration of particular examples and stories that illustrate the broader patterns of change in identity. Analytical techniques such as analysis, synthesis, deduction, generalisation, and comparison were utilised to organise and analyse information, deriving generalised conclusions that could be presented as a scholarly contribution to understanding the national identity formation processes in contemporary Ukraine.

The main methodological limitation of this study is based on the usage of secondary data and the consideration of socio-cultural changes only in the context of the war between Russia and Ukraine. The outcome of the study should be verified employing a larger geographical coverage, as well as qualitative and quantitative approaches.

RESULTS

National identity plays a pivotal role in consolidating society, particularly during crises. F. Fukuyama⁽¹⁹⁾ emphasises this critical insight. His theory posits that national identity enhances a country's physical security, contributes to the formation of effective governance systems, and stimulates economic development. Furthermore, a robust national identity can serve as a foundation for the support and development of liberal democracy.⁽¹⁹⁾

This concept is particularly pertinent to countries undergoing geopolitical shifts or internal challenges, as national identity unites citizens around shared objectives and values. In times of crisis, such as conflicts or economic collapse, national identity can motivate mobilising resources and coordinating actions across all levels of society.^(20,21) Consequently, national identity is not merely a symbolic construct but a tangible instrument for ensuring societal stability and progress.

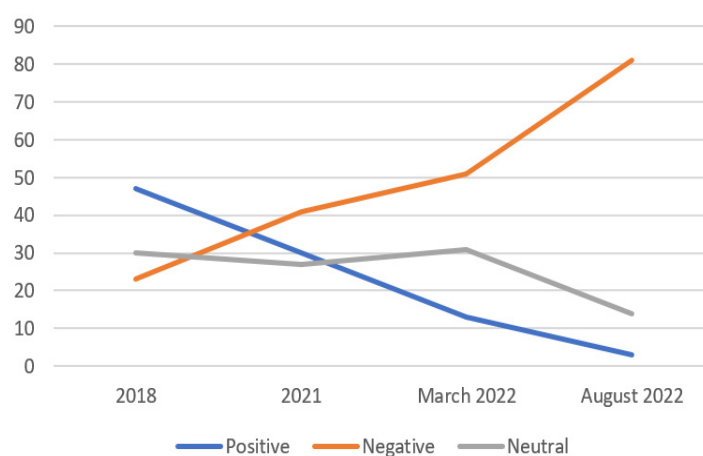
The process of Ukrainian self-identification has been prolonged due to objective factors. The formation of the Ukrainian nation occurred against a backdrop of centuries without statehood, compounded by territorial fragmentation.⁽⁸⁾ Such nation-building was based not on territorial unity but on culture and language. The inclusion of Ukrainian culture within the Russian and European geo-cultural spheres led to a cultural dichotomy and an ongoing conflict between Russia and Europe. During its time within the Russian Empire, Ukrainian identity was shaped under the dominance of the Russian language, with Ukrainian culture overshadowed by Russian. It led to the replacement of the Ukrainian national identity with a "Little Russian" identity, complete with its inferiority complex. Entrenched perceptions within a sizable segment of the Ukrainian population regarding cultural ties with Russians have obscured the formation and expression of a unified identity.⁽¹⁰⁾

This tension is observed across various facets of self-identification, ranging from language policy discussions to ecclesiastical disputes. Along with a divergence of ethos, some Ukrainians embrace traditional Eastern norms (collectivism and hierarchical structures) in contrast to others who align with Western European principles

(autonomy, liberty, and representative governance).⁽⁹⁾

The commencement of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine in 2014 markedly intensified the dynamics of self-definition among Ukrainians. This introspection deepened substantially after Russia escalated its military actions, prompting widespread dissociation of Ukrainians from Russian associations. As posited by Stavrakakis,⁽²²⁾ the essence of national identity lies in its differentiation from the “other.” When this “other” is seen as an existential threat, the perceived differences may become stark, fostering cohesion among the threatened group.⁽²²⁾ Triandafyllidou⁽²³⁾ further elaborates that national identity is often defined in juxtaposition with “others,” typically through distinguishing oneself from other national and ethnic collectives. She notes that “significant others” are crucial in sculpting national identity.

For Ukrainians, Russians were such “significant others.” In 2010, a large part of Ukrainian society (85 %) indicated minimal social distance from Russians, as the study “Tolerance of the Ukrainian Population”⁽²⁴⁾ showed. However, following Russia’s occupation of Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine, attitudes underwent a significant shift. In 2018, only 47 % of Ukrainians held a positive view of Russians, with this dropping to just 3 % following the full-scale invasion (figure 1). Concurrently, the % of those who perceived Russians negatively increased to 81 %. These data demonstrate a profound transformation of Ukrainian national identity in response to external aggression and challenges to sovereignty.



Source: “Seventeenth National Survey: Identity. Patriotism. Values”⁽²⁵⁾

Figure 1. Ukrainians’ Attitudes Towards Russians Dynamics

Figure 1’s data reveals a notable change in the perceived relations between Ukrainians and Russians, suggesting the erosion of the previously accepted narrative of unity in light of the ongoing intense Russian military actions. In 2017, 27 % of participants endorsed the concept of kinship between the two nations. As of 2023, this perspective has dwindled to a mere 4 %. Conversely, the number of individuals who consider that Ukrainians and Russians have always been distinct has risen from 16 % to 43 %.⁽²⁵⁾ These developments highlight the expanding societal gulf between Ukrainians and Russians, reaffirming the distinctiveness of Ukrainian culture and its significance as an essential element of the national psyche.

Edensor⁽²⁶⁾ has observed that traditional cultural forms are becoming intertwined with, and sometimes overshadowed by, elements from contemporary popular culture, domestically and globally. For an extended period, Russian cultural influence was notable in Ukraine, primarily through the spread of narratives by Russian entities as a strategy of cultural diplomacy.

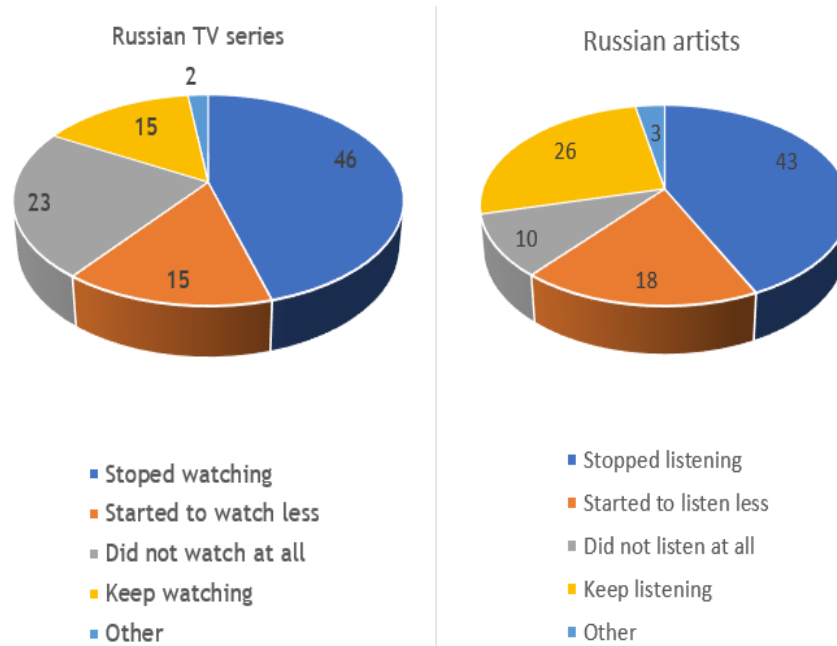
Since 2014, Ukrainian policy has included measures to curtail the spread of Russian media and cultural works, which initially did not garner widespread acceptance among the populace.⁽²⁷⁾ However, the inception of intensified hostilities has markedly shifted Ukrainian public sentiment regarding Russian cultural influences:

- 46 % of the surveyed group have ceased watching Russian TV series.
- 15 % have substantially decreased their viewership.
- 23 % only engaged with them after the conflict.

Moreover, 43 % of Ukrainians have discontinued listening to Russian music, yet 26 % still do. Concurrently, 84 % of the population has abandoned Russian visual media, and 71 % no longer engage with Russian auditory media.

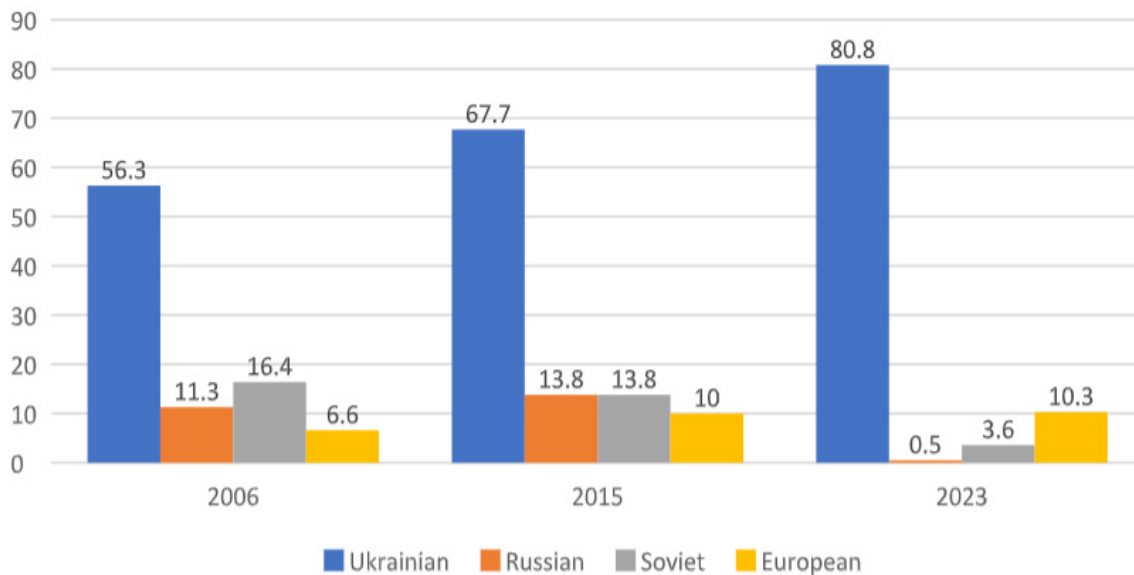
Throughout the war, Ukrainians’ cultural self-perception has undergone considerable shifts. In 2006, 56,3 % embraced Ukrainian cultural identity; by 2023, that figure escalated to almost 81 %. In contrast, affinity for Soviet cultural norms plunged from 16,4 % in 2006 to 3,6 % in 2023. Similarly, the fraction of the populace aligning

with Russian cultural norms dwindled from 11,3 % to a mere 0,5 %⁽²⁵⁾. Concurrently, Ukrainians’ connection to European cultural values has grown from 3,6 to 6,4 points. In tandem, the number of individuals identifying with Soviet Union ideals has dropped from 2,9 to 1,1 points.⁽²⁸⁾



Source: “Seventeenth National Survey: Identity. Patriotism. Values”⁽²⁵⁾
 Figure 2. Perspectives of Ukrainians on Russian Television Shows and Music

This trend towards distancing from the Russian-Soviet cultural narrative is crucial for Ukraine’s cultural and symbolic emancipation. This dynamic reinforces a distinct Ukrainian identity and is essential for bolstering the nation’s collective fortitude during wartime (figure 3).



Source: “Seventeenth National Survey: Identity. Patriotism. Values”⁽²⁵⁾
 Figure 3. Dynamics of Ukrainians’ Cultural Self-Identification

Language is central to shaping national identity, affecting how individuals engage with the world and fostering communal bonds. It serves as a conduit for crafting narratives that embody national identity and lays the groundwork for a shared sense of unity.⁽²⁹⁾

The war between Russia and Ukraine has dramatically reduced the linguistic division that once hindered the unity of the Ukrainian nation and was a focal point of political discord. The Ukrainian language has been widely

embraced across various spheres of daily life, from professional environments to personal interactions. Earlier resistance to the compulsory use of Ukrainian in-service industries has diminished amidst the conflict.

Language has emerged as a defining symbol of distinction between Ukrainians and the opposing forces. Within six months of intense hostilities with Russia, 19 % of Ukrainians had fully transitioned to using the Ukrainian language. Meanwhile, 41 % of those who were bilingual or primarily Russian-speaking began favouring Ukrainian in their daily communication. Data from the “Seventeenth National Survey: Identity. Patriotism”⁽²⁵⁾ reveals a sharp decline in those endorsing Russian as an official language, plunging from 27 % in 2014 to just 3 % in 2022. By the summer of 2023, the survey indicated that approximately 60 % of participants spoke exclusively in Ukrainian, 30 % utilised both languages, and a mere 9 % persisted in using Russian.⁽³⁰⁾

Ukraine has seen notable shifts in its religious landscape, especially with its move away from the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate. When the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was recognised as independent in 2019, a majority of 54 % of Ukrainians were in favour. A portion of 31,2 % remained impartial, and about 11 % viewed this negatively.⁽³¹⁾ Within the next two years, the percentage of Ukrainians aligning with the OCU rose from 48 % to 58 %.⁽³²⁾ However, the proposal to adopt the revised Julian calendar, in line with the practice of most Orthodox churches, was not widely embraced initially. In 2016, only 15 % backed the change, but by 2023, support had escalated to 63 %, despite 18 % still being opposed.

The transformation of cultural norms often takes time to be firmly rooted in societal awareness. Despite recent shifts, most Orthodox Ukrainians (55 %) continue to observe Christmas on January 7th, which aligns with age-old traditions. However, there is a growing trend of people opting for the December 25th celebration, with those participating increasing from 4 % to 11 % in one year, and the number honouring both dates has gone up from 18 % to 25 %, as reported by The Twenty-Fourth National Survey “Ukraine in Times of War”.⁽³³⁾

Ukraine’s approach to its memorial landscape is complex, given the prevalence of Soviet-era and Russian monuments. With the start of the conflict with Russia in 2014 and the initiation of decommunisation efforts, there was a concerted movement to rename and dismantle relics of the Soviet past. This movement extended to Russian cultural markers in 2022. The transformation was particularly pronounced in cities with solid Russian aspects of local identity, such as Odesa and Kharkiv.

Kyiv took the forefront in these transformations, renaming 561 points of interest from 2014 to 2023, 324 of which occurred from 2022 to 2023, affecting streets, plazas, parks, and subway stations. Vinnytsia, Kryvyi Rih, and Sumy also underwent similar renaming and removal processes. In 2023, Kyiv was the leader among Ukrainian cities for the number of re-designated streets and public spaces. The shift became more nuanced in cities like Odesa and Kharkiv.

The intense bombardments by Russian military forces catalysed a change in perspective among locals and officials towards symbols associated with Russia. It led to actions such as removing a monument to Russian Empress Catherine II in Odesa in December 2022. The derussification process that commenced in Kharkiv in 2022 encountered certain obstacles. However, in January 2024, following extensive shelling of the city centre, Pushkinska Street was renamed in honour of the renowned Ukrainian philosopher Hryhoriy Skovoroda.⁽³⁴⁾

The full-scale Russian aggression has led to a shift in how Ukrainians perceive historical figures such as Ivan Mazepa, Symon Petlyura, and Stepan Bandera, whose activities previously sparked divided opinions. However, the most significant transformation in attitudes has affected the fighters of the UPA. In spring 2022, 80 % of respondents identified them as defenders of Ukraine’s independence, whereas from 2015 to 2021, this figure ranged from 41 % to 47 %.⁽²⁸⁾

As identity is a complex concept, particular attention is paid to its civic component, which changes under the influence of war and socio-cultural shifts. Firstly, there has been a notable increase in national pride in Ukraine, with the proportion of respondents identifying as proud of their country rising from 34 % in 2021 to 75 % in August 2022.⁽²⁵⁾ Additionally, there has been an increase in civic identification among Ukrainians. At the dawn of the 21st century, only about half of those surveyed identified as citizens of Ukraine. By 2022, this statistic varied from 72 % to 85 %, per different measurement approaches.⁽²⁸⁾ The valuation of Ukrainian citizenship on a scale from one to ten saw a rise from 7,9 in 2021 to 9,5 by the summer of 2022.⁽²⁵⁾

During the conflict, virtues such as compassion, dedication, national pride, and warmth are prominent in the collective mindset. By resisting adversity, Ukrainians become conscious of their nation’s resilience and the value of their commendable attributes. These characteristics are vital for the nation’s ongoing rejuvenation and progress.⁽³⁵⁾

From the initial days of the conflict, there was a pervasive belief among Ukrainians in their particular triumph (94 %). This uniform conviction of emerging as victors, spanning all demographic and social strata, signifies a departure from past self-views of defeat.⁽¹⁰⁾ Thus, the eventual success against Russia has become a significant factor in reinforcing Ukrainian national self-awareness. A significant majority, 88 %, believed in victory, with 63 % having unwavering confidence in this outcome.⁽³⁶⁾

Given these developments, projecting Ukraine’s trajectory becomes vital. It envisions it as a sovereign state envisioned by its citizens as autonomous, self-governing, thriving, harmonious, and robust.⁽²⁵⁾

The conflict has catalysed significant socio-cultural shifts within Ukraine, impacting foundational elements of its national identity, such as linguistic preferences, spiritual practices, cultural heritage, and collective historical understanding. These shifts have solidified a collective national consciousness and fortified the nation's capacity to confront external challenges.

DISCUSSION

The notion of “national identity” is intricate by nature, woven from a tapestry of complex facets, inclusive of the terms “nation” and “identity” themselves. As a compound concept, national identity integrates various components such as language, faith, cultural expressions, legal status, and ethnic prototypes. These facets have been crucial in the shaping and, notably, the evolving character of Ukrainian national consciousness, as marked by pivotal historical milestones, including the Proclamation of Independence, the Orange Revolution of 2004, and the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-2014, among others. However, the most dramatic reformation of Ukrainian national consciousness is tied to the comprehensive military incursion by Russia in 2022.

Historically, Ukrainian identity has been dichotomous, significantly influenced by the Russian factor, leading to internal conflicts regarding language, religion, values, and orientations in foreign policy, hindering the formation of a cohesive identity. The initial aggression perpetrated by Russia in 2014 prompted a reassessment of linguistic and cultural identities in Ukraine. While this did not result in a complete rupture of mental ties with Russia, the situation took a decisive turn with the full-scale invasion in 2022, catalysing a distancing from Russian influence. Consequently, the dominant trend in socio-cultural changes after February 24th 2022, is the decolonisation of Ukrainian historical, linguistic and cultural-symbolic space, effectively purging it of Russian-Soviet elements.

There has been a notable increase in the use of the Ukrainian language among Ukrainians, which serves as a significant identifier for distinguishing “ours” from “foreign” or “hostile.” There has also been a noticeable decrease in the consumption of Russian cultural products, including TV series, books, and music. The war has accelerated the process of cleansing Ukrainian memorial spaces of Russian-Soviet symbolism, a process that began in 2014. This ongoing transformation also reinforces civic identity, engendering a sense of belonging to one's state and deepening national pride. Collectively, these developments contribute to the consolidation of national identity at various levels and strengthen Ukrainian resilience in their resistance to the aggressor.

CONCLUSION

The full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war has served as a powerful catalyst for socio-cultural transformations, significantly strengthening Ukrainian national identity and resilience. This conflict effectively severed both physical and psychological ties with Russia and Russians, with whom many Ukrainians maintained “warm” relations even after the events of 2014. Thus, Ukrainian identity has shifted from a fusion of Russian and Ukrainian elements to a pronounced delineation, with the “other” now viewed as an adversary. This redefinition aids the Ukrainian community in moving beyond the outdated “Little Russian” concept and its embedded sense of subordination. The unification of Ukrainian identity unfolds across several arenas that once were the heart of heated discussions, including language, faith, cultural expressions, historical understanding, and collective memory. This deep-rooted socio-cultural shift fortifies the Ukrainian identity, establishing a robust base for Ukraine as a political entity. It bolsters the national fortitude of Ukrainians in their strife with Russia and paves the way for future political restructuring post-conflict.

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