



Russia's War in Ukraine as a "War for Identity" and Appropriation of Cultural Tradition



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Abstract: The article analyzes Russia's current war in Ukraine through the perspective of Francis Fukuyama's concept of identity politics based on Samuel Huntington's civilization approach. We argue that Russia's war against Ukraine is a new type of war – a "war for identity" – a war that is waged primarily for the appropriation of Ukrainian cultural identity and historical heritage, rather than for political or economic resources. We believe that an effective explanatory framework for its consideration is provided by Huntington's civilizational concept of the world order, in which the most widespread and dangerous conflicts will be between peoples belonging to different civilizations (and cultures). The article emphasizes that the Russian war in Ukraine is a direct consequence of two factors: on the one hand, Russia is not satisfied with its own cultural tradition and seeks to appropriate Ukrainian cultural identity and historical heritage in order to restore the "lost empire"; on the other hand, Russia is historically a region of civilizational fault line between the countries of Western civilization and the countries of Eastern civilizations, it is a "torn" state in terms of cultural identity and has maintained its integrity for centuries only due to its authoritarian political regime, but constantly produces numerous conflicts around its borders.

Keywords: Cultural identity; civilization; cultural heritage; Ukraine; war for identity; failed state; Russia.

I. Introduction

"Memory laws in Russia prevent the open discussion of Russian history.

It is unfortunate that the word 'Ukraine' has been banned from Russian schoolbooks.

*As a historian of Russia, I look forward to the day
when there can be free discussion of Russia's fascinating history."*

(Timothy Snyder 2023)

February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, contrary to any logic or common sense. Hence, Russia continued its brutal campaign, which began in 2014, to divide and conquer an independent neighboring country piece by piece, violating internationally recognized borders and disregarding international law. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been called by the Russian leadership, a "special military operation," which has been going with involving an unprecedented number of troops and weapons, and with a front line of more than 1,300 kilometers. The Russian authorities persecute and imprison their citizens for using the word "war" and for peacefully protesting (see Ilyshina 2022a; 2022b).

The very fact that a war is being waged in Europe in the twenty-first century is barbaric, but what is most striking is the brutality with which the Russian army treats the local population in the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories, rejecting all laws and customs of warfare. Mass murder, kidnapping of children, rape, torture of men, women, children, and the elderly, mass looting, deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure. And, most notably, the targeted destruction of cultural heritage – historical sites and art museums, libraries, theaters, churches, monasteries, monuments and memorial complexes that are in no way connected to military facilities (see Shcherba 2023; Lubinets 2023). The Russian leadership, calling Russians and Ukrainians "one people," nevertheless destroys Ukrainians (citizens of Ukraine, including those of Russian origin), physically and systematically tries to destroy Ukrainian culture, which is a unique compilation of combined different political, religious and ethnic cultural traditions, which is why the Ukrainian state is significantly different from modern Russia (Mishalova 2021, 199; Hordiichuk 2023, 9–17).

The courage and resilience of the Ukrainian people (both military and civilian) in the fight against the occupiers, which is astonishing to the whole world, should be emphasized. The Russian military and political leadership did not count on such open and stubborn resistance to the occupation. To cite just one example, the residents of the predominantly Russian-speaking city of Kherson (the only regional center that the Russians managed to capture), systematically held rallies for more than three months, chanting in Russian to the Russian soldiers to "go away" and "Kherson is Ukraine!" (Harding 2022) until the occupying authorities began brutally shooting peaceful demonstrators (Harasymenko & Soroka 2022).

For the last two decades, the current Russian leadership has been assuring itself, its people, and the whole world that Ukraine is a failed state, that Ukrainians do not exist (they are just "spoiled" Russians), stressing that the collective West, led by the United States, is trying to turn Ukraine into an "anti-Russian" state that threatens the integrity of the

Russian Federation. Formally, this is declared as the main reason for launching a "special military operation" against an independent neighboring state. In other words, according to the logic of the Russian leadership, Ukraine, with a population of approximately 42 million and an area of 603,700 km², poses an existential threat to the state with a population of 146.5 million and an area of 17,125,191 km² (the largest country in the modern world) (Avramenko 2023; HURI 2021).

At first glance, this statement is surprising, because it is indeed hard to believe that a country ten times larger in territory, resources and economic capacity can seriously see itself in danger from a small neighbor that declares its desire to join the European Union and a country which did not make any territorial claims against Russia until 2014. It is also surprising and completely incomprehensible, that in an era of unprecedented development of information technology, artificial intelligence, space tourism and plans to colonize neighboring planets in the solar system, the Russian Federation spends significant economic resources, falls subject to sanctions, and rebuilds its economy on a military basis with the sole purpose of enslaving neighboring countries, in order to rebuild the "greatness" of Russia, which was allegedly lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union¹ and the Russian Empire a hundred years earlier². No professional historian will comment on the phantasmagorical ideas about the past of Russian leaders, as they are mostly devoid of rational basis and are scientifically worthless. However, strange as it may seem, it is through appeals to the past (as they imagined it) that the Russian leadership is trying to legitimize and justify all its aggressive actions against Ukraine, as well as other countries in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region.

Why is Russia's foreign policy in the early twenty-first century guided by the ideas of

1 For the current president of Russia, the collapse of the Soviet Union is the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century, as Vladimir Putin proclaimed in his annual address to the Russian people in 2005 (see Putin 2005). That is, not the two world wars that took the lives of tens of millions of people around the world, the Holocaust, the Holodomor, which many countries today recognize as genocide of the Ukrainian people, and many other terrible pages of twentieth-century history, but the collapse of the totalitarian Soviet regime. This has provided a historic opportunity for many Eastern European countries – Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Finland – to regain their independence and build democratic and liberal political systems. In December 2021, on the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin leader repeated this thesis in a slightly modified form, calling the collapse of the Soviet Union the death of "historical Russia" (Osborn & Osrtroukh 2021).

2 The modern Russian Federation deliberately draws a line of direct succession between itself and the Soviet Union, as well as between the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. This is evidenced by the fact that the flags of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation were demonstratively displayed at this year's 2023 Economic Forum in St. Petersburg (e.g., Lubynets 2023).

This is a blatant historical manipulation, as the Russian Federation was only one of 15 Soviet republics within the Soviet Union, which was held together only by force, and as soon as the totalitarian military and political regime weakened enough, it collapsed naturally without external interference. Even more odious is the line of kinship between the communist Soviet Union with the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Russian Empire, on the ruins of which it arose as a denial of the latter with the execution of the royal family, the mass exile and extermination of the ruling noble elite. It is no accident that the name of the Union of Socialist Republics was Soviet, not Russian, which, according to the idea of the founders of the Soviet Union, was supposed to symbolize a complete detachment from the imperial heritage.

imperial greatness of the mid-twentieth or even the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Why is its leadership so desperate to deny the existence of an independent Ukrainian state, Ukrainian people and Ukrainian culture? *Our opinions that Russia's current war against Ukraine should be viewed through the prism of the concept of identity politics as understood by Francis Fukuyama, based on Samuel Huntington's cultural and civilizational approach with his idea of the "clash of civilizations" as a leading trend in the development of modern world politics and inevitable military conflicts along the lines of civilizational faults.* We use historical and comparative methods to explore and highlight the cultural differences in political traditions between Russians and Ukrainians, which have resulted in different political systems and cultural contexts in modern Russia and Ukraine.

II. Russia's War in Ukraine as a "War for Identity"

Russia's current war in Ukraine is a war of a qualitatively new type: a "war for identity" in the sense of Francis Fukuyama's identity politics and in the context of Samuel Huntington's cultural and civilizational concept. We argue that this war is primarily a war for cultural identity and historical heritage, not just for political or economic resources. Its purpose is to appropriate the cultural tradition and history of Ukraine (in particular, the cultural heritage of the Middle Ages of the Kyivan Rus, as well as the history of modern times), which are extremely important for Moscow. On this foundation, Russia builds and justifies its imperial narratives and aggressive ambitions, which in turn contribute to strengthening the cult of power and authoritarianism within the modern Russian Federation, keeping power in the hands of the ruling elite, and consolidating society with the common goal of "defeating the enemy" in order to divert attention from internal political problems (Hordiichuk 2023, 15–16; Bykova 2022, 442).

In his book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Fukuyama draws attention to the fact that in the second decade of the twenty-first century, identity issues have come to the forefront in many regions of the world. In his opinion, demand for recognition of one's identity is the master concept that unites many processes in contemporary world politics (Fukuyama 2018, xv). Fukuyama's concept of identity is based on the notion of human dignity and the inherent desire for recognition of this dignity by others, which applies equally to individuals and communities. He notes that often what are perceived as economic motivations in people's actions actually grow out of a need for recognition, where

the inner sense of dignity seeks recognition. It is not enough that I have a sense of my own worth if other people do not publicly acknowledge it or, worse yet, if they denigrate me or do not acknowledge my existence. Self-esteem arises out of esteem by others. Because human beings naturally crave recognition, the modern sense of identity evolves quickly into identity politics, in which individuals demand public recognition of their worth (Fukuyama 2018, 10).

Fukuyama criticizes the economic model of human behavior, according to which human beings are seen as rational individuals who want to maximize their "utility" (that is, their material well-being), and politics is simply an extension of this maximizing behavior. While he does not deny that people are capable of rational behavior and are driven by self-interest in seeking more wealth and resources, he emphasizes that while economic inequality, which has emerged over the last fifty years of globalization, is a major factor explaining contemporary politics, dissatisfaction with material status becomes much more acute when it is attached to feelings of indignity and humiliation. Moreover, much of what we understand to be economic motivation often reflects not just a straightforward desire for wealth and resources, but the fact that money is perceived to be a marker of status and buys respect. On the other hand, economic theory does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the motives of a soldier falling on the grenade, or for the actions of a suicide bomber, or for the many other cases in which people are motivated by something other than material gain. All of this prompts to look for explanations in other theories of human behavior and directs Fukuyama's thought to questions of identity (Fukuyama 2018, 10–11).

The concepts of "identity" and "identity politics" are relatively recent. The former is associated with the name of the psychologist Erik Erikson in the 1950s, while the latter appeared in cultural policy only in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, the word "identity" is used to refer to many phenomena: from social categories or roles to basic information about a person. If we use the word in this fashion, then identities have always existed (Fukuyama 2018, 9). Sinisa Malesevic in his book *Identity as Ideology: Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism* notes that identity is not something tangible or visible: it cannot be touched, smelled, tasted or seen. However, its presence is so widespread today that almost everything has become an issue of identity. This overuse of the term creates a cacophonous confusion with many competing understandings of identity (Malesevic 2006, 13 and 16). Rogers Brubaker distinguishes several main approaches to the use of the term "identity" in the humanities, while pointing out that as an analytical tool it is "hopelessly ambiguous"³. However, he emphasizes that the term "identity" is designed to do a lot of work (Brubaker 2006, 33 and 35).

We will proceed from Samuel Huntington's definition of identity, according to which identity is an individual or group self-awareness, a product of self-identification,

³ Brubaker proposes to distinguish five main approaches to the use of the term identity: (1) identity is opposed to the concept of "interest" in order to highlight and conceptualize certain non-instrumental ways of social and political behavior; (2) identity as a specifically collective phenomenon of "sameness" between members of a certain group, which should be manifested in solidarity, common inclinations or beliefs, or collective action; (3) understanding identity as a basis for individual or collective self-awareness ("self"); (4) identity as a processual, interactive development of collective self-understanding, solidarity or "groupness" that can make collective action possible; (5) identity as a fleeting product of multiple and competing discourses, which emphasizes the unstable, multiple, changing and fragmented nature of the contemporary self. Furthermore, Brubaker argues that the concepts of identity within these five approaches range from a "strong" to a "weak" understanding of the concept (more in Brubaker 2006, 33–35 and 37–38).

which implies that “you” or “I” have special qualities that distinguish “me” from “you” and “us” from “them.” For example, a child is born with certain elements of identity (name, gender, origin, citizenship), but they remain latent until the child becomes aware of them and defines himself or herself accordingly. Identity is extremely important because it determines a person’s behavior (Huntington 2004, 21). Thus, identity is an internal awareness of belonging to a certain socio-cultural community based on the awareness of similarities with its representatives and, at the same time, differences from representatives of other socio-cultural communities. It includes a set of ideas about oneself, one’s position in society, identification with certain groups, cultural models, social responsibilities, and the value and emotional attitude to these connections and responsibilities.

According to Malesevic, the extraordinary popularity of the term “identity” is explained by the fact that it has replaced three traditional concepts in the understanding of social processes – race, national character and social consciousness – and has become a grand umbrella term that functions as a legitimate political tool in academic and popular discourse. Nevertheless, the concept of identity remains complex, with a large number of critics who consider it an ill-suited concept for explaining major social changes (Malesevic 2006, 21, 31 and 36).

Returning to Fukuyama’s ideas, it should be emphasized that the phenomenon of identity itself is complex. Uncertainty about one’s own identity is a feature of life in the contemporary world. Modern identities are characterized by mobility, changeability and complexity. The modernization and globalization of the world are characterized by dynamic changes and disruptions to the usual order, as well as the emergence of alternatives where none existed before. According to Fukuyama, this instability of identity is generally a positive phenomenon, because for many generations millions of people have fled from villages and traditional societies where there was no choice to those where there was choice. This is one of the results of the industrialization process. However, the freedom and possibilities of choice that exist in modern liberal societies can also make people feel unhappy and isolated from each other. They begin to feel nostalgic for the community and orderly life they believe they have lost, or that their ancestors supposedly lived. The true identity they seek is something that connects them to other people. This is the reason why people can easily be attracted to leaders who say that the current government is betraying or disrespecting them, or that they belong to an important community whose greatness must be recognized again. Fukuyama concludes that there is no escape from identity and identity politics in the modern world (Fukuyama 2018, 164–165).

Fukuyama mentions two versions of identity politics: the first is aimed at recognizing the dignity of the individual, the second at recognizing the dignity of the community, although both are very closely interrelated. Most people do not have infinite depth of individuality. What they think of as their true inner self is actually made up of their relationships with other people, and the norms and expectations of those other people as a given environment. Humans are deeply social beings, inclined to want to conform to

the social norms in which they live. When a stable shared moral horizon disappears and is replaced by a cacophony of alternative value systems, most people do not rejoice at their freedom of choice. On the contrary, they feel acutely insecure and alienated, experiencing an identity crisis that leads them in the opposite direction from expressive individualism – to the search for a common identity that will reconnect the individual with the social group and form a new moral horizon (Fukuyama 2018, 50, 56–57).

Fukuyama's thesis that in many cases people may not know their true inner self and only vaguely feel that they are forced to live a life that is not their own, which in turn can lead to an obsession with the question "Who we really are?." Often, the search for an answer to this question also causes feelings of alienation and anxiety, which can be successfully exploited by various political forces by practicing the "politics of resentment". In such cases, the political leader tends to mobilize his or her supporters by claiming that the dignity of their group or community has been insulted, humiliated or violated. This sense of being offended, Fukuyama maintains, creates a need for the group or community to have its dignity publicly recognized. A humiliated group that seeks to regain its lost dignity has a much greater emotional impact and potential for action than people who are simply motivated by economic gain. Fukuyama cites the examples of modern Russia and Hungary, as well as the United States during the presidency of Donald Trump. When Vladimir Putin talks about the tragedy of the collapse of the Soviet Union and how Europe and the US took advantage of Russia's weakness in the 1990s to bring NATO closer to its borders, and that he wants Russia to be treated as a great power, not a weak regional player, this is the best example of the practice of resentment politics and identity politics manipulation (Fukuyama 2018, 6–7). But the situation with manipulations around national identity in the modern Russian Federation is much more complicated.

Richard Jenkins makes an extremely interesting connection between identity and the language of communities. He emphasizes that identity is the human ability, rooted in language, to know "who is who" (and, accordingly, "what is what"). It includes knowing who we are, who others are, they know who we are, we know who they think we are, and so on: a multidimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our place in it, as individuals and as members of communities (ethnic, religious, gender or professional groups, nations). Identification is a process, not a "thing". It is not something that someone may or may not have, it is something that a person does. Another important point that Jenkins makes is that identification must have meaning through the power of cultural symbols and ritual experience (Jenkins 2008, 5–6).

Malesevic goes further and emphasizes that ethnic groups and nations are not "billiard balls," they do not exist and could never exist on their own. They appear as specific group labels in a particular moment of time and with particular social and political reasons. In both cases, they ideologically cling to the notion of culture, whether in its anthropological understanding (as a special way of collective existence) or in the socio-political understanding of high culture (culture as civilizational refinement), which

is important for nation-building (Malesevic 2006, 27).

Anthony Smith argues that national identity is directly based on cultural heritage, linking national identity to the preservation and continuous reproduction of the patterns of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that make up the cultural heritage of nations, as well as the identification of people with this particular heritage and the values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions (Smith 2001, 30). In his seminal *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic* he proposes to view the nation as a cultural resource:

A significant aspect of the nation as a form of community characterized by a cultural and/or political identity has been its role as a model of sociocultural organization. If at the conceptual level the nation needs to be seen as an analytic category, at the concrete historical level it can also be fruitfully regarded as a social and cultural resource, or better as a set of resources and a model which can be used in different ways and in varying circumstances. Just as the Han empire in China and Akkadian empire in Mesopotamia acted as models and cultural resources for later attempts to build empires in these and other areas, so the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the city-states of ancient Athens and Sparta and Republican Rome, provided models and guides for subsequent communities. This is not to prejudge the question of whether, or how far, these societies might themselves be designated as *national* communities, only to say that much later nations looked back to these examples as models of nationhood and drew from them certain resources – ideals, beliefs, and attachments, as well as of social and cultural organization (Smith 2008, 22).

In his recent article analyzing Smith's cultural concept of the nation, Marek Wódka emphasizes that it is in line with the ideas of such representatives of the Polish school of humanistic sociology as Jan Turowski, Stanisław Fel, Florian Znaniecki, and Janusz Mariański. According to this approach, a nation is understood, first of all, as a cultural community that has been formed over time and creates its own distinctive culture, which includes a common language, customs, art, science, business activity, traditions and other forms of activity. An important role in this is played by the ideals or goals pursued by this national community (Wódka 2019, 141–142). Wódka concludes that

it is culture, its type, shape and advancement level, as developed within a community that significantly affects the quality of social, political, and economic life. At this point, it only seems reasonable to do what Smith did in his definition of the nation when he eliminated the concept of a “common economy” in favor of attaching more importance to culture as the key determinant of the development of the nation (Wódka 2019, 142).

We argue that this is precisely the problem with the cultural identity of the modern Russian Federation: Russia is not satisfied with its own history and culture of the last three hundred years (since the founding of the Russian Empire in 1721–1917, and then the Soviet Union with its center in Moscow) or five hundred years (if we take into account the period of formation of the Moscow Duchy in the fifteenth century within the Golden Horde and the Moscow Kingdom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), which they call “great Russian culture.” Russia needs a bold appropriation of Ukrainian cultural

heritage and historical tradition, as it is on their basis that the Russian leadership builds the imperial narratives of the modern Russian Federation. Russian leaders want to rule a country with a thousand-year-old history and cultural tradition dating back to the early Middle Ages, and consider it a normal practice in the twenty-first century to appropriate Ukrainian thousand-year-old culture and history (in particular, the history of medieval Ukraine – Kyivan Rus) by capturing Ukrainian territories⁴.

In fact, Russia has already successfully done this once⁵. Gradually annexing Ukrainian lands to its state in portions during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (Moscow had full control over the entire territory of Ukraine only in the twentieth century and for a rather short period of time: from 1939–1991 as part of the Soviet Union), the Russian authorities built on this basis their imperial historical narrative of "Great Russia" or "Russian World" in modern interpretation, which they still impose on their own population and the world through propaganda and educational institutions. Marlene Laruelle and Oleksandr Zabirko emphasize the imperialist nature of the concept of the "Russian World" and its use by the Russian leadership as a political tool in domestic and foreign policy, especially in relation to its closest neighbors. However, while Laruelle in conducts an in-depth analysis of the use of this political concept primarily as a means of

4 According to this flawed logic, the United States, for example, should consider the history of Great Britain to be its historical tradition and demand that the constituent parts of the kingdom, as separate states, become part of the United States only on the basis that Americans and British speak the same language – English, many American colonists were of British descent and representatives of the Protestant Church, and in general, the United States is a territorially larger country, has nuclear weapons, and its leadership wants to be remembered as the "gatherers of the English-speaking world." Thus, the same claims could be made against modern post-colonial Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Or, according to the same logic of reasoning, the British themselves would have to look for "historical England" somewhere on the banks of the Ganges in ancient India or the Nile in ancient Egypt, just because these countries were under British colonial rule for a relatively small part of their millennia-long history. Even hypothetically, such an approach to issues of historical and cultural heritage is impossible in the modern civilized world. However, the Russian leadership considers this approach to be "historically just": to destroy the Ukrainian nation politically and physically, since the very fact of its existence with its own history and culture contradicts their imperial historical narratives.

5 It is extremely important to stress that the modern Russian imperial historical narrative was formed only in the first half of the nineteenth century after the final absorption of the Hetmanate (a Ukrainian Cossack state of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and the destruction of the Zaporizhzhian Sich in 1775 (a self-governing Cossack institution of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in the southern theories of the modern Ukrainian state). Only after that did the official historiography of the Russian Empire begin to draw a direct link between the history of Kyivan Rus and Moscow Duchy and the Russian Empire. For example, the multi-volume works of Nikolai Karamzin's *History of the Russian State* (orig. 1812–1829) and Sergei Solovyov's *History of Russia from the Earliest Times* (orig. 1851–1879). In order to reconcile the inconsistency in the names "Rus" and "Moscow State", Solovyov proposed a division into "Kyivan Rus" and "Moscow Rus," thus consolidating and legitimizing the thesis of political and cultural "heredity" between the Ukrainian medieval state of Rus and the Russian Empire. In the early twentieth century Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky in his *History of Ukraine-Rus* refuted these Russian narratives and Russian encroachment on Ukrainian history, describing the political history of Ukrainian lands and showing the process of formation of the modern Ukrainian nation from the time of Rus in the context of European history through incorporation with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and without significant influence from Russia until almost the end of the eighteenth century, when, after the final partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a large part of modern Ukraine came under Russian rule. More about Russian imperial narratives see in Plokyh (Plokyh 2017).

soft power, manifested in cultural policy, public diplomacy and humanitarian cooperation (Laruelle 2015, 6 and 9–12), Zbirko, after Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, concludes that the "Russian World" as a model of space and order has already become "institutionalized" at the state level. It continues to act as a permanent reference point in literary, journalistic and analytical texts, but it also demands that the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia be integrated into the real Russian state. Zbirko writes:

The major Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, has not significantly changed the content of Russian world, but has largely destroyed the framework for its use as an instrument of soft power. In light of Russia's increasing (self-)isolation, the imaginary space of "Russian world" is shrinking to the borders of the Russian Federation or to the territories that are held directly (and by military force) under Russia's control (Zbirko 2023).

In our opinion, *that is why the existence of an independent Ukrainian state is indeed an existential challenge, but not for the existence of the modern Russian Federation. It is an existential challenge for the existence of Russian imperial narratives, which justify and legalize their aggressive foreign policy.* This is the main reason for the open disdain and hostility towards the independent Ukrainian state on the part of the current Russian president and his entourage.

Another no less important problem, in our view, is the fact that the Russian leadership does not realize that appropriating a foreign cultural tradition will not help solve the chronic problem with its own Russian identity⁶. According to Smith's cultural concept of the nation, cultural heritage is a powerful cultural resource for the development of the nation to which it directly belongs or, at least, to which this cultural heritage is close. The Ukrainian cultural tradition is foreign to Russians: from the early Middle Ages to the present day, Ukraine (no matter what it was called at different times and what state entities it was temporarily part of) has always had an extremely multi-ethnic population, which is a direct consequence of its favorable geographical location, and has always been

⁶ The study of Russian identity and the reasons for its crisis today and in historical retrospect is not the direct subject of this article, but it seems important to briefly note the fundamental circumstances that cause constant dilemmas in the formation of Russian national identity: first, the lack of full-fledged reliable research on its own history and culture. Russian historical scholarship is an ideological project created in the interests of state propaganda than a system of knowledge with an independent community of historians in the sense of Thomas Kuhn; secondly, the rejection and displacement of the cultural traditions of colonized peoples (in fact, the prohibition of their languages, beliefs, and history). Instead, at the state level, a consistent policy of unreasonable exaltation of the Russian people over others is pursued, the cult of greatness of which is based on the pathetic ideas of "God's election," "imperialism," "special mission," which justify Russia's wars of aggression and divert attention from internal political problems (low level of socio-economic development in most of the Russian Federation's territories, corruption, etc.); thirdly, an authoritarian, ideologically driven system of governance with a lack of freedom of speech, developed critical thinking, a culture of dialogue and compromise. All of this leads to the forced emigration of the most active and conscious citizens of the Russian Federation, carriers of liberal democratic values who do not support the actions of the authorities. As a result, Russian society and elites, both consciously and unconsciously, continue to "run away from freedom" (and responsibility) into authoritarianism, destruction, and conformism, as described in Erich Fromm's concept of an authoritarian society, and therefore are unable to create a democratic social project and form their own cultural identity.

characterized by religious diversity (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam were represented from the earliest times; later Greek Catholicism and various branches of Protestantism were added), which led to the formation of a Ukrainian democratic political culture with developed traditions of local self-government (Mishalova 2021, 196–199). Thus, in the Middle Ages, the Kyivan duke, was only the first among equals, and often not the most influential, which was typical of the feudal system of government in medieval Europe⁷. This completely contradicts the Russian (or rather, Moscow) political tradition, which is characterized by a model of centralized authoritarian rule – autocracy, which is best reflected in the political slogan of the Russian Empire – “Orthodoxy. Autocracy. Nationality” (a single horizontal of governance, one religion, one people).

The Moscow Duchy, as a quasi-state formation, was formed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries within the Golden Horde under the powerful influence of Asian civilization on the basis of a khan's label for reign. This label gave Moscow the right to collect tribute in favor of the Golden Horde khan, in which Moscow dukes proved to be more inventive, and cruel than Tver, Ryazan or Rostov dukes, as they were able to secure this right for themselves. That is, the Moscow model of statehood is based on the mechanism of collecting tribute and robbing both its own population and the population of neighboring countries. In our opinion, this model of “tribute collection” is still the basis of the functioning of the Russian state. For example, Moscow extracts raw materials in Siberia and the Far East⁸, sells and invests in weapons, propaganda, and private military companies to expand its theories and spheres of influence around the world. The current Russian leadership, headed by Vladimir Putin (“collective Putin”), sees this as the development of their country, rather than the economic, infrastructural and cultural development of communities and regions in the middle of Russia (outside the two administrative centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg).

To summarize, it is important to highlight that Russia's existence, the formation of its cult of “mighty empire” over the centuries, has been achieved through aggressive expansion, rewriting its own history and appropriating others', physical extermination of intellectuals, suppression of opposition, and information brainwashing of its own society. At a time when Western countries, along with the rest of the civilized world, are

⁷ Yaroslav Hrytsak, the most famous and quoted contemporary Ukrainian historian, draws interesting parallels between Ukrainian history and the histories of European countries from the Middle Ages to the present day (for details see Yermolenko 2019).

⁸ Janusz Bugajski provides interesting facts about the huge differences between Russian regions in terms of wealth, investment, per capita income, education and professional opportunities. For example, while Sakhalin Oblast has a gross regional product on a par with Singapore, the Republic of Ingushetia is closer to Honduras. In times of prolonged economic hardship, resource-rich regions are increasingly affected by Moscow's tax collection regime. The Tyumen region, for example, has administrative jurisdiction over two autonomous districts (Khanty-Mansi and Yamalo-Nenets) that produce 48 per cent of Russia's oil and about 80 per cent of its natural gas. In 2020, these two districts accounted for more than 17 per cent of the federal budget's tax revenues and were forced to transfer most of their tax revenues to the federal centre, receiving only a small portion in return. The federal budget of Russia leaves personal income tax revenues and part of corporate income tax revenues in regional hands, but collects all tax revenues from mining (for details see Bugajski 2022, 120–208).

investing resources in the development of science and technology, education, culture, and tourism, Russia is building up its military armaments, continuing wars of aggression, and threatening to use nuclear weapons (Hordiichuk 2023, 5). Russia rejects Europe and cooperation with the West, contesting the post-Cold War order and strives to establish a new set of rules, based on its neoimperial policy (Stepniewski 2017, 175).

III. Russia as a Country of Civilizational Faults

We believe that the most productive framework for considering and analyzing Russia's war in Ukraine is Huntington's civilizational concept of a new world order, in which the most widespread and dangerous conflicts will be between peoples belonging to different civilizations.

Huntington elaborated an interesting concept of a new international world order based on civilizations, in which the most widespread, important and dangerous conflicts will be between peoples belonging to different cultures. In his seminal article *The Clash of Civilizations?*, he writes:

It is my hypothesis that fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will be the battle lines the future (Huntington 1993, 22).

After the Cold War, world politics became multipolar and multicivilizational for the first time in history. The most important differences between people now lie in the cultural sphere, not in the ideological, political or economic sphere, as it used to be. Cultural identity is what matters most to most people (Huntington 1996, 20–21). According to Manuel Castells, identity is the source of people's meanings and experiences. The construction of identities uses building materials from history, geography, biology, productive institutions, collective memory and personal fantasies, the apparatus of power and religious revelation (Castells 2011, 6–7).

But what does Huntington mean by civilizations? Civilizations are cultural entities. Villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, religion groups, all have distinct cultures at different levels of cultural heterogeneity. The culture of a village in southern Italy may be different from that of a village in northern Italy, but both will share in a common Italian culture that distinguishes them from German villages. European communities, in turn, will share cultural feature that distinguish them from Arab or Chinese communities. Arabs, Chinese and Westerners, however, are not part of any broader cultural entity. They constitute civilizations. A civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity. It is defined both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-

identification of people. Huntington emphasizes that human identity has a multi-level structure: a resident of Rome may define himself with varying degrees of intensity as a Roman, an Italian, a Catholic, a Christian, a European, a Westerner. The civilization to which he belongs is the broadest level of identification with which he intensely identifies. People can and do redefine their identities and, as a result, the composition and boundaries of civilizations change⁹ (Huntington 1993, 23–24).

Huntington also draws attention to another important point, namely that in the modern world, improvements in transport and communication have led to more frequent, intense, symmetrical and inclusive interactions between representatives of different civilizations. As a result, their civilizational identities are becoming increasingly noticeable. The situation is complicated by the fact that each person has several identities that can compete or reinforce each other: family, educational, professional, territorial, institutional, cultural, ideological, party, and others. Identifications in one dimension may conflict with identifications in another dimension. Cultural identification is sharply increasing in importance compared to other dimensions of identity (Huntington 1996, 129). Huntington notes that:

the sources of conflict between states and groups from different civilizations are, in large measure, those which have always generated conflict between groups: control of people, territory, wealth, and resources, and relative power, that is the ability to impose one's own values, culture, and institutions on another group as compared to that group's ability to do that to you. Conflict between cultural groups, however, may also involve cultural issues. (...) Differences in material interest can be negotiated and often settled by compromise in a way cultural issues cannot. Hindus and Muslims are unlikely to resolve the issue of whether a temple or a mosque should be built at Ayodhya by building both, or neither, or a syncretic building that is both a mosque and a temple. Nor can what might seem to be a straight forward territorial question between Albanian Muslims and Orthodox Serbs concerning Kosovo or between Jews and Arabs concerning

⁹ Huntington claims that in the future, the world will be shaped largely by the interaction between seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilizations. The most important conflicts of the future will take place along the cultural fault lines that separate these civilizations from each other. The main circumstances that will cause these conflicts are as follows: first, the differences between civilizations are fundamental. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, traditions and, most importantly, religion. These differences are the product of centuries, so they will not disappear anytime soon. They are more fundamental than differences between political ideologies and political regimes. Second, the world is becoming a "smaller place." Interaction between peoples of different civilizations is growing, and it is strengthening civilizational consciousness and awareness of differences between civilizations and commonalities within civilizations. Third, the processes of economic modernization and social change around the world are moving people away from their ancient local identities and weakening the nation-state as a source of identity. Fourthly, the growth of civilizational consciousness is being reinforced by the dual influence of the West. On the one hand, the West is at the peak of its power. At the same time, however, and perhaps as a consequence, non-Western civilizations are returning to their origins. Fifth, the rise of economic regionalism, which is based on a common civilization, as culture and religion also form the basis for economic cooperation. Sixth, cultural characteristics and differences are less variable and therefore more difficult to compromise and resolve than political or economic ones. In class or ideological conflicts, the key question was: "Whose side are you on?" and people could and did choose sides and switch sides. The rich can become poor, and the poor can become rich, but in conflicts between civilizations the question is different, namely: "Who are you?" A person can be half French, half Arab, and even a citizen of two countries at the same time. It is much more difficult to be half Catholic and half Muslim (for details see Huntington 1993).

Jerusalem be easily settled, since each place has deep historical, cultural, and emotional meaning to both peoples (Huntington 1996, 129–130).

According to Huntington, global security requires acceptance of global multiculturalism. In the contemporary multicultural world, we must reject universalism, embrace diversity and look for commonalities. Instead of promoting the allegedly universal features of one civilization, the conditions of cultural coexistence demand a search for what most civilizations have in common. He proposes to follow the rule of joint mediation (which means that major powers negotiate with each other to deter or stop wars on the fault line between states or groups belonging to their civilizations) and the rule of commonality (which means that people in each civilization should seek and try to expand the values, institutions and practices that they share with people of other civilizations). This is the most reliable way to prevent a clash of civilizations and avoid the resulting damage in all spheres of life (Huntington 1996, 316–320). The policy of the modern Russian Federation is completely opposite to these Huntington's recommendations.

Huntington's view of the relationship between Ukraine and Russia is crucially important in the context of our study. According to his civilizational approach, Russia and Ukraine (at least the eastern part of the country) belong to the same civilization – the Slavic-Orthodox one:

These are two Slavic, primarily Orthodox peoples who have had close relationships for centuries and between whom intermarriage is common. Despite highly contentious issues and the pressure of extreme nationalists on both sides, the leaders of both countries worked hard and largely successfully to moderate these disputes (Huntington 1996, 167).

Moreover, he points out that just as Franco-German relations are the core of the European Union, Russian-Ukrainian relations are the basis of the unity of the Orthodox world. However, Huntington envisaged three possible options for the development of events in relations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The first scenario is based on the thesis of a single Slavic-Orthodox civilization, and if civilization is what matters, violence between Ukrainians and Russians is unlikely, he believed.

The second and more likely possibility was that Ukraine could split along the fault line into two separate parts, the eastern part of which would unite with Russia. The third and, in his opinion, most likely scenario would be the following: Ukraine will remain united but internally divided, so while maintaining formal independence, it will generally cooperate closely with Russia. After the transitional issues of nuclear weapons and armed forces are resolved, the most serious long-term problems will be economic, which will be facilitated in part by a common culture and close personal ties (Huntington 1996, 167–168).

According to Huntington's civilizational approach, in countries with large groups of people belonging to different civilizations, identity issues will be particularly acute,

as these states are located directly on the lines of civilizational fault lines, and their societies are doomed to conflict and disintegration. In his opinion, Ukraine belongs to such countries of civilizational fault lines ("cleft countries"), because it is divided, firstly, by the question of language (Ukrainian-speaking west and Russian-speaking east), and secondly, by the question of religion (Uniate Greek Catholic west and Orthodox east). He states:

Ukraine, however, is a cleft country with two distinct cultures. The civilizational fault line between the West and Orthodoxy runs through its heart and has done so for centuries. At times in the past, western Ukraine was part of Poland, Lithuania, and the Austro-Hungarian empire. A large portion of its population have been adherents of the Uniate Church which practices Orthodox rites but acknowledges the authority of the Pope. Historically, western Ukrainians have spoken Ukrainian and have been strongly nationalist in their outlook. The people of eastern Ukraine, on the other hand, have been overwhelmingly Orthodox and have in large part spoken Russian (Huntington 1996, 165–166).

Huntington cites the results of the July 1994 presidential election as an illustration of this east-west divide in Ukraine. The acting president Leonid Kravchuk, who, despite his close cooperation with Russian leaders, identified himself as a nationalist, won thirteen regions of western Ukraine with a majority of over 90 percent. His opponent, Leonid Kuchma, who had only begun taking Ukrainian language lessons during the election campaign, won thirteen eastern oblasts with relatively large majorities. Leonid Kuchma won with 52 per cent of the vote, leading Huntington to conclude that the majority of Ukrainian society in 1994 confirmed the choice of Bohdan Khmelnytsky in 1654. Accordingly, from his point of view, this situation reflected not so much ethnic polarization as cultural differences (Huntington 1996, 166).

Thus, according to Huntington's vision, the line of civilizational division in Eastern Europe should pass through the territory of Ukraine, as this country is religiously divided into Orthodox eastern (closer to Russia) and Greek Catholic (oriented towards the Western world) western parts. However, in our opinion, the historically formed differences and contradictions between different parts of Ukraine (in addition to religious ones, there are also linguistic, ideological, value and economic ones), supported by pro-Russian propaganda, have significantly decreased over the past thirty years as a result of the final choice of the European path of development by Ukrainians (Hordiichuk 2021, 329). The consolidated resistance of Ukrainian society to Russia's military invasion of Ukraine is the best evidence of this. *Therefore, there are now grounds to argue that, in fact, it is not Ukraine but Russia that is the country that has historically been on the line of civilizations clash, with a long (chronic) crisis of cultural identity – as a construct built on artificially created myths and narratives, historical heritage stolen from neighboring nations, false propaganda and manipulation of public consciousness.*

Russians cannot decide who they are – part of the Western or Eastern world. We argue that this applies to representatives of the political and cultural elites as well as to ordinary people. On the one hand, they actively use the technological achievements and

everyday comfort items of the Western world (from cars to clothes), actively buy real estate and educate their children in Western universities, consider themselves Orthodox Christians. But on the other hand, politically, ideologically and in everyday life they are more similar to some Eastern authoritarian states. And, as Zabirko notes, the Russians are actively using the vague idea of a single “Eurasian” space, as a basis for state unity and political cohesion (Zabirko 2023).

Instead, the modern Ukrainian state, despite all its domestic problems, is an established political nation whose representatives freely combine their political and civic identity as Ukrainians with their ethnic identities without opposing them. Thus, we can speak of Ukrainians and Ukrainians of Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Belarusian, German, Bulgarian, Greek, Moldovan, Crimean Tatar origin, etc. The Ukrainian case is not unique, because such modern developed Western countries as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and France also have a political understanding of the nation (Mishalova 2021, 202). In our opinion, this extremely important fact was not taken into account by the Russian leadership either in 2022 or in 2014, as the political elites of Putin’s Russia think in the paradigm “Ukraine as a state does not exist. Ukrainians and Russians are one people.” This shows that Russian propaganda has a greater impact on those who create it. As Taras Kuzio notes, Russian elites and the majority of Russians do not look upon Ukraine and Belarus as “foreign” countries (Kuzio 2006, 407). Volodymyr Kulyk highlights that since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, many commentators have pointed to the surprisingly strong and inclusive national identity of Ukrainians. What was particularly surprising to most foreign observers the fact that many of the people fighting against Russia on the battlefield or supported the resistance in other ways were people of Russian descent and/or speaking mostly Russian in everyday life (Kulyk 2023, 975). Although Andrew Wilson argues that the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state in 1991 also came as a great surprise in the chancelleries, universities and boardrooms of the West – a surprise that many still cannot adjust to. There were also very real reasons why Ukraine was then considered to be an unlikely candidate as a new nation, given its pronounced patterns of ethnic, linguistic, religious and regional diversity. That is why Wilson calls Ukrainians “an unexpected nation” and emphasizes that “an unexpected nation is still a nation – no more or less than many others” (Wilson 2015, xi).

Roman Szporluk convincingly stresses that Ukrainians have defined themselves as a political nation from the very beginning, as evidenced by the declaration of independence of Ukraine in August 1991, in which the restored Ukrainian state does not identify itself as an ethnic state. It was a territorial, political, and legal unit, in fact the successor to the Ukrainian SSR. Its citizens had different ethnic origins, and their main languages were Ukrainian and Russian (in different proportions in different regions), as well as languages of other ethnic groups. The Ukrainian state proclaimed that the source of power in it was “the people of Ukraine,” which, according to Szporluk, was a “historical compromise in 1991” (Szporluk 2000, 327 and 341). Yaroslav Hrytsak argues that traditional Ukrainian

historiography cannot explain the origin of this phenomenon in 1991. Among the many possible reasons, he draws attention to the following: first, the process of nation-building involved not only ethnic Ukrainians, but also local national minorities, who, during the existence of the Ukrainian SSR in the 1920s–1980s, started to identify themselves with the Ukrainian territory; secondly, the constructive role of the Ukrainian ruling elites, who were able to make a rational choice in favor of the concept of a new political nation – the “people of Ukraine” – in order not to disturb a certain balance between different regions with different historical, political and cultural heritage (Hrytsak 2019, 580–582).

Moreover, it can be stated that Ukraine's troubled historical past – the experience of being colonized, the absence of continuous statehood and its own nation-state has had not only negative consequences, but also positive ones: the experience of living and preserving its own identity in different civilizational systems, the experience of establishing intercultural and interreligious communication and interaction. As a result, modern Ukraine is one of the oldest and richest European cultural traditions in political, ethnic, religious and general cultural terms, and modern Ukrainians have a cultural and political choice (Mishalova 2021, 202 and 211).

Both historically and in our time, Ukraine is part of Western Christian civilization beyond the confessional divisions (Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants), which we believe are not as defining of the Christian world as Huntington believed. An example of this is the recent synchronous transition to the New Julian calendar of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from 1 September 2023, which will mean that Ukrainians of both these Christian denominations will celebrate such major holidays as Christmas, Epiphany and others together with the entire Christian civilized world (Guliczuk 2023).

In 1993, Huntington called Russia the world's most “torn country” because its population is made up of a large number of peoples from different civilizations. Leaders of such “torn countries” tend to pursue a strategy of joining the West, but the history, culture and traditions of these countries are non-Western. The question of whether Russia is part of the West or the leader of a distinct Slavic-Orthodox civilization has been a recurring theme in its history. This question was overshadowed by the victory of the Communists in Russia, but with the discrediting of Communism, it has re-emerged. For example, President Boris Yeltsin tried to adopt Western principles and goals and aimed to make Russia a “normal” country and part of the West. However, his policies were constantly criticized by some political elites, who believed that he was subordinating Russia's interests to those of the West and reducing Russia's military power. The Russian people are as divided as the elite. Huntington therefore concludes that, as for much of its history, Russia in the early 1990s was a truly torn country (Huntington 1993, 42–44).

We maintain that, culturally, Russia continues to be a country of civilizational fault lines, or a “torn” country in Huntington's terminology. Janusz Bugajski in his recent book *Failed State*, which he began writing before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine,

characterizes the Russian Federation as a multinational state held together only by a highly centralized decision-making system and a hierarchical power structure (Bugajski 2022, 14). He goes further and calls modern Russia a “failed state,” identifying the following criteria for its state failure: Russia’s incompleteness as a nation-state, manifestly false historical narratives, ongoing identity disputes, ideological disarray, a policy of persecution, demographic shortcomings, economic decline, environmental threats, social pressure, regional challenges and international defeats (Bugajski 2022, 9 and 18). In his view, much of Ukraine’s history and identity has been distorted or appropriated by Moscow, and Ukraine’s revival has exposed the fragile foundations of the Russian state. Russia’s war against Ukraine was a desperate attempt to save its own fragile history and confused multi-ethnic and imperial identity. Paradoxically, Russia’s identity has been further challenged by the war against Ukraine, which has strengthened Ukrainian solidarity and further alienated Ukrainians from Russians. This blatant act of aggression has also underscored the need for decolonization to restore the past to generations of indigenous peoples who have suffered state oppression and russification as part of the Russian Federation (Bugajski 2022, vii-viii).

IV. Conclusion

Russia’s current war in Ukraine is a new type of war – a “war for identity,” which should be viewed through the perspective of the concept of identity politics as understood by Francis Fukuyama, based on Samuel Huntington’s cultural and civilizational approach with his idea of the “clash of civilizations” as a leading trend in the development of modern world politics and inevitable military conflicts along the lines of civilizational faults.

We argue that this war is primarily a war for the appropriation of Ukraine’s cultural identity and historical heritage, not for political or economic resources. Russia is not satisfied with its own history and culture; Russian leaders want to rule a country with a thousand-year history and cultural tradition, which is of crucial importance to Moscow, as it is the basis on which Russia builds and justifies its imperial narratives and aggressive ambitions. Thus, the Russian war in Ukraine is a direct consequence of two interrelated reasons: on the one hand, Russia is not satisfied with its own cultural tradition, it seeks to appropriate Ukrainian cultural identity and historical heritage in order to restore the “lost empire,” and on the other hand, Russia historically and currently is a state which is located on the line of the civilizational faults between the countries of Western civilization and the countries of Eastern civilizations, is “torn” in terms of cultural identity and has maintained its integrity for centuries only by means of an authoritarian political regime, but it constantly produces numerous conflicts around its borders.

We believe that Huntington’s civilizational concept of a new world order (in which the most widespread and dangerous conflicts will be between peoples belonging to different civilizations as cultural entities) provides a productive framework for considering

and analyzing Russia's war in Ukraine. However, Huntington's vision has a significant fallacy. Today, it can be argued that, in fact, not Ukraine, but Russia is the country that has historically been on the line of clash of civilizations, a country of civilizational faults (a civilizationally "cleft country" and "torn country" in Huntington's terminology). Russians cannot decide whether they are part of the Western or Eastern world, and this applies equally to representatives of political and cultural elites and ordinary people. In contrast, the modern Ukrainian state, despite all its internal problems, is an established political nation that is clearly aware of its civilizational affiliation with Western culture, consciously choosing and defending the Western way of development with arms.

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