The Nation Ukraine Has Become

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The reason resistance to the Russian invasion is so strong is that the country's people already chose a new, decisively democratic identity.

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A sardonic joke has been spreading on Ukrainian social media since Russia began its full-scale invasion of the country on February 24. There are several variations, but it basically goes: *Maybe now NATO can apply to join Ukraine*. While Ukrainians have expressed a strong desire to join the NATO alliance in recent years, this meme flips that expected script, highlighting instead the colossal resistance efforts undertaken by Ukrainians since the invasion began. These efforts have stunned onlookers; the David and Goliath cliché seems actually to apply. Against the enormity of the Russian military, few outside Ukraine expected Ukrainians to put up such a fierce fight, or to maintain control of major cities for as long as they have.

Despite its impossible premise, the meme holds an implicit question for NATO countries and their allies: Do you really know, or remember, what your alliance is for? Because Ukrainians certainly do. As, respectively, a Ukrainian who has spent most of her life in the UK (Khromeychuk), and an American with Ukrainian ethnicity (Bilocerkowycz), we exist at the intersection of Ukrainian and "Western" cultures and concerns. We see it as crucial not only that the Ukrainian resistance wins active support abroad, but also that Ukrainians gain recognition as global leaders of the democratic world with a deep understanding of what's at stake in this pivotal moment.

The seismic changes that have occurred—and are occurring now—in Ukrainian society beg us to consider, simultaneously, what is changing and will change in the West.

For Ukraine, 2014 was a year of tragedies that changed everything: the killing of protesters during the Maidan Revolution; Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea; the start of the Donbas war in the East. Yet these events also deepened Ukrainian civic identity and accelerated the maturation of Ukraine's democratic culture in ways that continue today, even as Russian rockets and bombs fall on its cities. After 2014, Ukrainians asked themselves what sort of country they wished to live in, and then set about building it with a sense of urgency. As Ukraine faces down a brutally belligerent Vladimir Putin, it is the Ukrainian people who are defining what the future of European security and democracy will look like for all.

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"Soul and body we'll lay down, all for our freedom." This line from the Ukrainian national anthem, a pathos-filled poem in the best traditions of nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism, acquired a very real meaning for Ukrainians in 2014. It rang from speakers on Independence Square in Kyiv and was sung by all who could several times a day: in defiance of the riot police, in celebration of repelled attacks, and in mourning the victims. The anthem was sung both by those who had learned it at school and knew it well and by those who were learning it for the first time.

Each found comfort and meaning in this poem, which had been written by an ethnographer from Kyiv (when it was still part of the Russian Empire) and set to music by a Greek Catholic priest from Galicia (which was then within the Austrian Empire). Feminists made a small alteration to the line "And we'll show that we're brothers of Cossack stock," replacing "brothers" with "sisters." They might have gotten sideways glances from fellow protesters at first, but it was a creation of a new tradition, like so much in Ukraine that year.

The Maidan demonstrations began as a rally against President Viktor Yanukovych's decision to suspend preparations for signing an Association

Agreement with the European Union, thus refusing to strengthen Ukraine's ties with the EU, but it turned into a revolution against abuse of power, corruption, and the attempt by Yanukovych's regime to turn Ukraine into a dictatorship. This was not the first people's uprising staged by Ukrainians.

There's a popular notion that Ukrainians like to take to the streets at least every decade. The big protests the country saw before the Maidan were during the Orange Revolution in 2004, triggered by a fraudulent presidential election. The seeds of that movement had been sown in 1990 during the Revolution on the Granite, a student-led protest that greeted the disintegration of the USSR with a central claim to Ukrainian independence and statehood. There were other protests, too, including powerful miners' strikes in the Donbas in the 1990s. But the Maidan was special. It was a moment when Ukrainians did not just make their voices heard, but made a lasting difference. Yanukovych fled the country and his pro-European successor was democratically elected—a nightmare for Vladimir Putin and his plans to keep the country under Russian influence.

This "reloading of the country," as one of the Maidan protest signs described the revolution, came at a high price. More than a hundred protesters were killed on Independence Square. Peaceful, unarmed demonstrators were targeted and shot by the police. Many others were humiliated, kidnapped, and sometimes murdered by state-hired thugs. And more violence followed. Putin intervened, deciding that a fledgling democracy right on his doorstep was too great a risk: Ukrainians were demonstrating to Russians that it was possible for ordinary people to oust a dictator and decide their country's course. As Ukrainians got on with building the country they actually wanted to live in, Putin got on with doing everything in his power to stop them, illegally annexing Crimea and invading Donbas. Then, as now, the world watched with deep concern. That concern, short of the sanctions, humanitarian aid, and military supplies that have met the current invasion, was limited mostly to declarations.

Prior to the events of 2014, use of the anthem and other national symbols such as the traditional embroidered shirt (*vyshyvanka*) or the flower crown (*vinok*) was largely ceremonial and did not necessarily hold broader relevance in Ukrainian life. Many Ukrainians felt the failures of their national leadership acutely: In the face of so much corruption and abuse of power, what do such symbols stand for, really? But the Maidan sparked a grassroots wave of Ukrainization and a wider embrace of national symbols. Demonstrators sang the anthem as a stay against exhaustion and fear. Now, in 2022, Ukrainians from various regions are singing these lyrics in bomb shelters and in front of Russian tanks. (Another recent video shows antiwar protesters in Moscow being hauled away by police while belting out “Soul and body we’ll lay down, all for our freedom.”)

This civic nationalism that has been maturing in Ukraine is characterized by its political identification with a liberal-democratic state. Distinct from ethnic nationalism, this civic nationalist framework does not suppress differences in ethnicity, language, religion, or culture within the population but fosters people’s collective willingness to uphold shared democratic institutions and values, encouraging solidarity between groups and overcoming historical divisions. Though no surprise perhaps, it was an indication of how far this civic identity has taken root that in 2019 researchers affiliated with the London School of Economics found that 70 percent of Ukrainians polled across all regions said they preferred such a civic model of national identity.

Alexey Furman/Getty Images Staryi Vovchynets, Ukraine, March 5, 2022

When Putin first occupied Crimea in 2014, many non-Tatar Ukrainians expressed regret for having neglected Crimean Tatar concerns and cultural rights. A Muslim ethnic group indigenous to the peninsula, Crimean Tatars have been systematically persecuted by Russian authorities for opposing the occupation. In February 2014, as Russian troops were seizing the regional capital of Simferopol, three Crimean Tatar activists created a Facebook group called KrymSOS (CrimeaSOS), which they began using to inform people in other parts of Ukraine and abroad about what was happening there. After one week, the group had 15,000 followers and soon, an email inbox full of messages from mainland Ukrainians offering accommodation to those fleeing the peninsula. Today, that Facebook page has almost 50,000 followers and continues to serve as a center for reporting and mutual aid efforts. At a diplomatic level, in August 2021 Ukraine held the inaugural summit of the Crimea Platform, which aims to counteract the Russian

occupation by coordinating a more effective international response with foreign governments.

In the last eight years, cooperation between Crimean Tatars and non-Tatar Ukrainians has grown as both groups have found shared meaning in their historical and contemporary suffering at the hands of Moscow. As the Crimean Tatar activist Tamila Ravil Qizi Tasheva told Ukrainer.net, "The year 2014 was a turning point. Big misfortune came to us: the war, territory annexation. But along with that…recognition in Ukrainian society…understanding that Crimean Tatars are an indigenous people of Ukraine, an ethnic community that needs support." In 2016, the Crimean Tatar artist Jamala was voted to represent Ukraine at the annual Eurovision song contest. Jamala went on to take first place in the competition with "1944," a song about the deportation of Crimean Tatars under Stalin for alleged Nazi collaboration. Its chorus is in the Crimean Tatar language.

Similar work has gone into addressing alienation between residents of western and eastern Ukraine. The western territories of Ukraine had been part of the Habsburg Empire and interwar Poland before they were incorporated into the USSR. Much of the rest of the country fell within the Russian Empire and thus became part of the USSR nearly two decades earlier. This cleavage left a lasting mark, especially as memories of a difficult past.

When Russian aggression began in 2014, a common sentiment among western Ukrainians was regret at having spent little or no time in eastern Ukraine. Several programs started in response: the Ukrainian Catholic University began exchanges that brought students to Lviv from the East to foster new social ties; Freedom Home youth center was established in Kramatorsk—the first city captured by Russian proxy forces in 2014, later retaken by the Ukrainian military—as a gathering place for Ukrainians from all regions and as a hub for volunteer projects; the Theatre of Displaced People ran a documentary project called "Children and Soldiers," which invited local teenagers in eastern cities and Ukrainian soldiers stationed

there to talk about their experiences of the war live on stage together. And today, the country's east is literally moving west, as waves of internally displaced people from around the areas most affected by Russia's full-scale invasion take shelter in cities and towns of western Ukraine.

Another area of solidarity-building that has made strides since 2014 is among Ukrainian Jews and non-Jewish citizens. The Center for Urban History in Lviv has held commemorations, exhibits, and conferences on the city's Jewish history, bringing together scholars of Ukrainian studies and Jewish studies. The public debate over the artistic direction of a private initiative to build a memorial at Babyn Yar has been a further noteworthy development. Babyn Yar is a ravine in Kyiv where over 33,000 Jews were murdered in just two days of the Holocaust, with an estimated total of 100,000 people killed over the duration of the Nazi occupation. Soon after the Russian filmmaker Ilya Khrzhanovsky was named the memorial complex's artistic director in 2019, Ukrainian cultural activists demanded his dismissal, arguing that his intended design "dangerously approaches the impression of a Holocaust Disney," in the words of Dieter Bogner, an Austrian adviser to the project. They also criticized the project's acceptance of Russian oligarch funding, which they said would result in pressure to include a Kremlin-approved perspective in the center's historical narrative. For example, it is typical in Russian discourse to downplay the Soviet Union's signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact with the Nazis in 1939, the treaty that led to the partition and invasion of Poland. While the disagreements and delays over the project are frustrating, the fact that these important conversations are happening in the public sphere is a sign of progress.

On March 1, the Babyn Yar memorial grounds were hit by debris from Russian shelling, and five civilians were reportedly killed in the attack. For the time being, the Babyn Yar project coordinators have shifted their focus from designing a memorial complex to documenting Russian crimes against humanity in Ukraine, announcing the establishment of a database for the UN International Court of Justice in the Hague.

Contesting a Kremlin-approved narrative at Babyn Yar will likely be even more imperative in the years to come, given that Putin has claimed "de-Nazification" as a central justification for the atrocities his forces are currently inflicting. Although Moscow's propaganda insists on a myth that Nazis run the government in Kyiv, in reality the far right has little political relevance in Ukraine. Despite forming a coalition of far-right parties ahead of the 2019 election, the united nationalist bloc received little more than 2 percent of the vote—well below the 5 percent threshold required for a party or bloc to take seats in parliament. And this turnout was much lower than those for ultranationalist parties in countries like Germany, Italy, and France, where far-right candidates have won vote shares between 10 and 17 percent in recent elections.

Where present-day anti-Semitism is concerned, a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2015–2016 found that Ukraine had by far the smallest proportion of respondents who said they "would not accept Jews as fellow citizens" of any central and eastern European country. This is not to deny that neo-Nazi elements exist in Ukraine. In response to the Russian aggression in Donbas in 2014, an ultranationalist fringe group formed the Azov battalion, comprising a few hundred fighters. The group was tolerated in 2014 as a fighting force against Russia, though its extremist views received broad public condemnation and the battalion featured frequently in Western media reports as a result. Their presence certainly presented a challenge for the country's prospects of postwar stability after 2014, especially for those promoting a civic nationalist agenda.

After 2014, the irregular battalion was transformed into a regiment of the Ministry of Interior, while its political activists largely transferred to a new far-right party, the National Corps. Support for it polls at about 0.5–1.5 percent, and for the 2019 election it joined the nationalist bloc, which performed poorly. While the regiment has retained the original battalion's far-right pagan symbol, the wolf's hook, and has links to the new nationalist party, Azov has become a regular fighting unit of Ukraine's National Guard; it would be incorrect to classify it as a political group anymore.

Police reform has been another area of serious attention in post-Maidan Ukraine. Ukraine's police force has received harsh criticism, particularly since 2014, for its brutality and corruption. In the year after Maidan, the new government held commissions at which public representatives could ask individual police officers questions like "What would you do if you received illegal orders?" and "When is a firearm used, and why?" These commissions uncovered significant ethical violations and criminal activity, and resulted in several thousand dismissals. But that process stalled in April 2015, when the Interior Ministry under Arsen Avakov, the former governor of Kharkiv region, changed the system for appointing representatives of civil society groups to the commissions, ultimately diluting the power of those hearings; some courts even began reinstating the fired officers. But Avakov's intervention provoked a backlash—"Avakov, *chort*," meaning "demon," became a popular rallying cry—and there was widespread relief when he eventually resigned in July 2021.

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The refugee crisis caused by the Russian invasion has exposed another layer of such problems. There have been reports in recent weeks about African students' and other non-Ukrainian nationals' trying to evacuate the country and experiencing racist treatment from Ukrainian border guards and police. It's clear that there is much work to be done in Ukraine to address anti-Black racism and discrimination against people of color and ethnic minorities, including its Afro-Ukrainian and Romani communities. At the same time, the exodus has shown the extent to which Ukraine has become a multiethnic and multicultural country, with substantial minorities of foreign students and immigrant workers from Nigeria, India, and elsewhere. Compelling political leaders to address such issues as brutality, bribery, and xenophobia among officers will be a critical step toward ensuring the public safety of all of Ukraine's residents and citizens.

The pace of post-Maidan police reforms and other anti-corruption initiatives slowed in 2015 and 2016, midway through the presidential term of Petro Poroshenko, a businessman who had been elected after the 2014 revolution. Tired of setbacks, Ukrainian voters in 2019 passed on the incumbent candidate and instead elected Volodymyr Zelensky, a political outsider who was then primarily known as a comedian and as the star of *Servant of the People*, a popular television series in which a high school history teacher becomes the unlikely president of Ukraine. Zelensky's platform was built on promises of ending government corruption and the war in Donbas. His successful bid for the presidency marked another free and democratic election—a rarity among several of Ukraine's regional neighbors like Belarus, Russia, and Azerbaijan, though an increasingly regular phenomenon in Ukraine.

In choosing Zelensky, Ukrainians demonstrated once again their healthy skepticism toward the political elite. Since February 24, Zelensky's courageous leadership and his decision to remain in Kyiv during the Russian bombardment, in spite of the direct threat to his life, have made him perhaps the first Ukrainian president to be truly respected by the people. And yet, when peace does return to Ukraine, the democratic culture is now

so rooted that it is conceivable to imagine his not being reelected—if for no other reason than that Ukrainians have a limitless appetite for better leadership.

For now, Zelensky's presidency represents an important symbolic shift, at least in part due to his identity: he is Jewish, and some of his own relatives were murdered in the Holocaust. At a 2019 press conference after the election, he found himself facing a heckler spouting anti-Semitic and homophobic abuse. Zelensky immediately shouted back: "I don't want to say anything negative about gay people because we all live together in an open and free society where each one can choose the language they want to speak, their ethnicity, and [sexual] orientation. Leave those people be, for God's sake!" It was remarkable for the region to see Zelensky voicing such a spirited public defense of the LGBTQ+ community. Although activists have pointed out the need for further reforms and protections for LGBTQ+ people, Zelensky's response encapsulated, in a handful of words, the goal of civic nationalism: a vision of a country unified not by a homogeneous ethnonational identity but by shared principles such as pluralism and tolerance.

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On January 22, Ukraine celebrated its Day of Unity. The holiday commemorates the Treaty of Unity signed in 1919, which joined the Western Ukrainian People's Republic (formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and the Ukrainian People's Republic (which was part of the Russian Empire) into one state. That statehood was terribly short-lived: the Bolsheviks soon defeated the fledgling independent Ukrainian state and absorbed it into the USSR. As a result, historians have often portrayed the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921 as a failure. Yet it lives on as a powerful vision of a unified Ukrainian state, its western and eastern parts forming one whole. In 1990, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians joined hands in a human chain to mark the day and demonstrate Ukraine's unity on its path to

independence. They did so again this year, in a country encircled by Russian troops ready to attack.

“Happy Day of Unity,” a friend from the southeastern city of Zaporizhzhia who lives in London texted in Ukrainian to her mother, who lives in Ukraine. “Thank you. Glory to Ukraine,” replied her mother in Russian. Both mother and daughter had stood on Kyiv’s Maidan in 2014, looking after the injured protesters and grieving for those killed. A Russian speaker, the daughter decided to switch to Ukrainian in 2014. Her mother did not, but didn’t consider herself any less a Ukrainian. “Glory to Ukraine” can be said in Russian with the same conviction as in Ukrainian.

Many outside observers struggle to understand this linguistic diversity. People from monolinguistic states find it hard to grasp the notion of a bilingual country with a sizeable population that switches from Russian to Ukrainian halfway through their sentences, in addition to groups that also speak Crimean Tatar, Romanian, Hungarian, Greek, and several other languages. For years, out of ignorance or laziness when reporting on Ukraine, the Western media referred to a color-coded map that partitioned the country among Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers. This cartographic bisection endorsed Putin’s myth of a divided nation. While Putin set himself the task of “rescuing” the Russian speakers whether they wanted it or not, Ukrainians themselves elected a Russophone president; Zelensky had to work at first to address his nation in idiomatic Ukrainian.

It took thirty years of independence, eight years of war in the east, and several days of heavy shelling this past month for the Western media to stop saying “*the* Ukraine” and start spelling and pronouncing Kyiv correctly (as opposed to the Russian transliteration Kiev). The color coding of the maps in news reports now reflects the areas that are under brutal bombardment from the Russian military: Kharkiv, Kherson, and Mariupol are all primarily Russophone cities. Their inhabitants are being shelled, not “rescued” by Putin.

Alexey Furman/Getty Images Staryi Vovchynets, Ukraine, March 5, 2022

Today, when Ukrainians come across strangers in uniform in areas that Russian troops are trying to occupy, they perform a language test on them: conscious of Russian saboteurs posing as Ukrainian soldiers, they ask them to say "*palianytsia*" (a typical Ukrainian bread loaf). Ukrainian soldiers—Russophone or not—will have no problem pronouncing the word correctly, but Russians get tongue-tied. The Kremlin chose to weaponize the language issue, deliberately misinforming the West, but Ukrainians are turning that weapon back on the aggressor—using their multilingualism to fight the occupation.

Russia's attempt to occupy more Ukrainian territory is frightening, precisely because Ukrainians already have a sense of what it would be like to live in a city under Russian control, having watched Crimea and Donbas. In Crimea, arbitrary detentions, torture, and disappearances have become the regime's

standard operating procedure. It's not just Crimean Tatars who are at risk; even ethnic Russians are not safe. "Public incitement to the violation of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation" is a criminal offense in Russia, which makes any advocacy of Crimea as part of Ukraine a crime. Oleh Sentsov, a Russophone filmmaker who opposed the occupation, was arrested on fabricated charges, tortured, and sentenced after a farcical trial in 2015 to twenty years' imprisonment.

The case of the Izolyatsia arts center is a microcosm of what has happened under the occupation of Donbas. Established in a former factory building in 2010, it soon became a vibrant art center, retaining the name of the product that had once been made there: *izoliatsiia*, or insulation. The Ukrainian word also means "isolation," though, and that acquired a harrowing connotation in 2014, when Russian proxies took over the gallery site and turned it into a concentration camp for prisoners of war and civilian hostages. Stanislav Aseyev, a Ukrainian journalist and native of Donetsk, was held in Izolyatsia from 2017 to 2019. In his account of his imprisonment, he told of numerous prisoners he'd known who chose suicide over endless torture.

The territory already occupied thus offers a grim glimpse into the future for all of Ukraine if the "Russian World" engulfs it. Ominous echoes of these repressions are sounding already in areas of Ukraine that have been newly occupied by Russia since February 24, with several reports of local Ukrainian mayors' being abducted by Russian occupiers and forced deportations of civilians. The knowledge that Ukraine has gained in the last eight years of conflict is a tragic form of knowledge, yet it gives Ukrainians a distinct advantage in that they understand the true nature of what is at stake in the defense of their realm. In this regard, they are well ahead of their European counterparts, who perhaps only now are beginning to grasp the dimensions of this struggle.

The professional Armed Forces of Ukraine are supported by the ever-growing volunteer corps of the Territorial Defense in the resistance. The

civilians choosing to take up arms, while admirable, have also come to a sad realization: they don't expect anyone to come to their rescue. Already, ordinary, unarmed people in occupied towns, facing the Russians with nothing but Ukrainian flags and cries of "go home," risk being gunned down. Old men stand in front of tanks and armored vehicles to prevent their advance into towns. The sunflower, a symbol of mourning and peace in Ukraine, has also become a symbol of defiance: a few days into the invasion, an unarmed woman went up to a Russian soldier and told him to take sunflower seeds she held out and put them in his pockets so that, she said, sunflowers would grow from his corpse when he died and was buried in Ukrainian soil.

Putin uses a retrograde, mythic version of a Russian past not only to oppress Ukrainians, but also to prevent his own people from imagining a future in which their lives are worth more than serving as cannon fodder for his wars. In contrast, Ukrainians have a clear vision of the future for themselves and their country, and they will do everything to protect it. As we watch the news reports about the shelling of hospitals and kindergartens, about babies being born in bomb shelters, we marvel at the resolve and resistance of the Ukrainian people. We should be asking ourselves, whether in London, Paris, New York, or beyond, the question that Kyiv is answering right now: Do we have a democratic future of our own worth fighting for?