

# CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR OF 2022

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*Svetlozar Kirilov. Culture and Identity in the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022*

*Abstract:* The publication examines identity politics in Ukraine and in Russia based on their presentation in the Ukrainian news agencies Ukrinform and UNIAN and the Russian news agencies RIA-Novosti and TASS.

*Keywords:* Russia; Ukraine; Kievan Rus; identity politics; Eurasianism

## **Introduction**

The war between Russia and Ukraine is a tragic event with enormous suffering and loss of human life. Russians and Ukrainians are close in terms of origin, language, or religion and, sadly, they are engaged in a brutal war that would poison their relations for a long period of time. This war will have an impact on the development of Europe and even the world in the coming decades. The military conflict has already deeply influenced the current conditions of Europe: energy shortages, inflation, flows of refugees are among the most visible signs of change.

The real war is conducted with tanks, artillery, and Kalashnikovs but there is also a parallel information war in which both Russia and Ukraine try to convince the world that their cause is just and right. The issues of culture and identity are deeply embedded in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The aim of the article is to outline the identity politics of both Russia and Ukraine on the basis of qualitative analysis of the publication of two Russian and two Ukrainian influential media outlets since the start of the war on February 24, 2022 until November 30, 2022. The Russian outlets are the state news agencies RIA-Novosti and TASS, which are the major propaganda arms of the Russian Federation. The Ukrainian outlets are Ukrinform and UNIAN. Ukrinform as a state news agency is responsible for delivering the statements of the chief Ukrainian institutions and politicians. UNIAN is a private Ukrainian news agency but also strives to present the Ukrainian point of view in the military conflict.

## 1. Are Russians and Ukrainians One People?

One of the major reasons for the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the Russian claim that a future membership of Ukraine in NATO would endanger Russia and thus, the “special military operation” is an act of defense for Russia in order to “demilitarize” Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> The Ukrainian position, logically, is that Ukraine is a sovereign state and has the right to choose its political and military alliances.

Vladimir Putin has claimed that Russians and Ukrainians are one people<sup>2</sup> and because of that Ukraine should be together with Russia and not with the West. Putin emphasized in his speech, televised on February 24, 2022, the day of the invasion, that it would be unacceptable for Russia to border with “anti-Russia”<sup>3</sup>, meaning pro-Western Ukraine. Russia has questioned the Ukrainian identity: “We are one people” has been one of the major Russian propaganda slogans placed in public places in Ukrainian territories occupied by the Russian army.

The issues of identity are very subtle, fine, and delicate. The ethnic identity is formed in two ways: naturally and by design. The natural development of ethnic identity is a long process during which people who share territory, language, religion, folklore and other important social characteristics at the end consider themselves as one people. But ethnic groups are also “imagined communities”:<sup>4</sup> political and cultural elites deliberately construct identity using the tools of political organization, education, and media. The state organization is a major facilitator for the construction of identity since it allows political and cultural elites to use textbooks, education, and media for that purpose.

Contemporary Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians originate from Eastern Slavic tribes, who began to migrate east from the Vistula River in the early medieval times. Gradually they have begun to form separate ethnic identities and considered themselves as Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians. However, Ukrainians and Belarussians managed to establish contemporary states only in 1991, after the break-up of the Soviet Union. In contrast, the Russian state is centuries older, which allowed a long period of construction of the Russian identity and suppression of separate identities of other groups on the territory of the Russian state.

Kievan Rus, established in the second part of the 9th century, was the first state of the Eastern Slavs. The identity of the people who inhabited Kievan Rus is

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<sup>1</sup> Президент России. Обращение Президента Российской Федерации. [online], 24 февр. 2022. Available from: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

<sup>2</sup> ПУТИН, Владимир. Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев. ТАСС, [online], 12 июля 2021. Available from: <https://tass.ru/politika/11884999>

<sup>3</sup> Президент России. Обращение Президента Российской Федерации. [online], 24 февр. 2022. Available from: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

<sup>4</sup> ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. NY: Verso, 2016.

hotly debated nowadays and both Russians and Ukrainians consider this medieval polity as their first state. However, the leading identity in the early medieval times was often tribal identity and we, contemporary people, incorrectly assume that people from earlier historical periods maintained identity shaped by our modern notions of ethnicity and nation.

Kievan Rus was founded by the Scandinavians and Eastern Slavic tribes and it is unclear to what extent their relations were based on union or on conquest<sup>5</sup>. Scandinavians, known as Varangians, were more advanced in terms of political organization and military skills and most likely they imposed their dominance on the Eastern Slavic tribes. However, the Eastern Slavs were more numerous and gradually their Scandinavian rules were assimilated into Slavic language and culture.

The United States embassy in Kiev published a collage on Twitter on February 22, 2022: pictures that compare Kiev and Moscow in the 10th and 11th centuries<sup>6</sup>. The main suggestion of the collage is that the cultural tradition of Kiev and Ukraine has been deeper than that of Moscow and Russia: when there were churches and monasteries in Kiev, Moscow was just a plot with wild forest. However, this perception is misleading since there were no separate Ukrainian and Russian identities at that time.

Kievan Rus disintegrated in the 11th century. The Tatars imposed in the 13th century their domination on princedoms that had emerged from Kievan Rus and maintained it until the end of the 15th century. Some of the Eastern Slavs developed a princedom centered in Moscow, which was independent from the Tatars since about 1480 and these Eastern Slavs evolved their identity as Russians in the following centuries. By contrast, Eastern Slavs who lived in what is now Ukraine and Belarus were ruled by the Lithuanians and Poles for a long time. Thus, the Russian identity was constructed for centuries by political and cultural elites from Moscow with the help of state organization, while there was no parallel development of the Ukrainian identity. Russia managed to establish control of the most of current territory of Ukraine in the 17th and 18th centuries. Since the population was Slavic and Orthodox, Moscow considered them as “Little Russians.” The Ukrainian identity gradually developed in the 19th century although it was suppressed by the Russian Empire and later by the Soviet Union. Only since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the establishment of the Ukrainian state in the same

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<sup>5</sup> SHEPARD, Jonathan. *The Origins of Rus' (c.900–1015)*. In: Perrie, Maureen (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Russia*, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> EPSTEIN, Jack and John HALTIWANGER. *US embassy trolls Russia with meme after Putin's revisionist history rant on why Ukraine is not a real country*. Business Insider, [online], 22 Feb. 2022. Available from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-embassy-trolls-russia-meme-after-putin-ukraine-history-rant-2022-2>

year, has there been the development of the Ukrainian identity with governmental support through education and media.

## **2. Annexation, Language, and Identity**

The legacy of the Soviet Union is that 17% of the population in Ukraine are Russians, mostly in eastern and southern regions, according to the last census in 2001<sup>7</sup>. A significant number of people with Ukrainian identity before the war regarded Russian, not Ukrainian, as their mother tongue. This linguistic situation is a heritage of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, when the Ukrainian language was suppressed. Russian was the language of administration in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. By contrast, Ukrainian language was considered useless for those who strive for a career in administration, education, law, arts and sciences.

The Language law in Ukraine in 2012 about regional languages provided an opportunity for a minority language to be used in those regions where the share of the population speaking this language was more than 10%. The language law enhanced not only the right of Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens, but also those who spoke Romanian, Hungarian, or other minority language. The Language law was voted by the parliament in July 2012, although not without clashes between those members of the parliament who supported it, mostly from the Party of Regions, and those who opposed it. The law was effective since August 2012 after the then President Victor Yanukovich signed it. It could be considered as consistent with the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for Protection of the National Minorities.

However, the civil protests in Kiev at the end of 2013, known as the Maidan protests, forced the pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovich to leave the office at the beginning of 2014. The new political authorities in Ukraine immediately proceeded to repeal the Language law of 2012. The Ukrainian parliament voted to annul it in February 2014. Although the president at that time refused to sign it, the attack against the law that allowed using of Russian in some regions was a clear indication for Russians in Ukraine that the new authorities in Kiev are going to infringe their rights. This triggered the separatist movement in Crimea and Donbas in 2014. The Language law of 2012 was announced void by the Constitutional court in 2018.

However, this does not mean turning a blind eye to the role in Russia in the separatism in 2014 and the war in 2022. Russian military forces were present in

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<sup>7</sup> State Statistics Committee Of Ukraine. General Results of the Census. National Composition of Population, [online], 2001. Available from: <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/>

Crimea before the referendum in March 2014 that led to the annexation of Crimea from the Russian Federation.

According to the Budapest memorandum of 1994, Russia recognized the territorial integrity of Ukraine, which at that time included Crimea and Donbas. Russia claims that protests in Kiev, in 2013–2014, were a coup that overthrew the democratically elected President. As a consequence, the Russian position is that the current Ukrainian state is illegitimate.

The majority of voters in referendums in Donbas, Kherson and Zaporozhie regions at the end of September, 2022, voted for joining Russia and these regions were annexed by the Russian Federation on September 30, 2022. The results from the referendums can hardly be recognized as legitimate: the referendums were hastily organized and there was a Russian military presence. Moreover, a significant part of pro-Ukrainian population left these regions and could not take part in the referendums. The data from the census in 2001 clearly indicated that in the Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporozhie and Kherson regions, Ukrainians were more numerous than Russians: 57% Ukrainians and 38% Russians in the Donetsk region; 58% Ukrainians and 39% Russians in the Lugansk region; 71% Ukrainians and 25% Russians in the Zaporozhie region; 82% Ukrainians and 14% Russians in the Kherson region<sup>8</sup>. If it was assumed that people with Ukrainian identity were loyal to Ukraine and participated in the referendum, the results would be different. However, Russians were a majority in Crimea according to the census in 2001: 59% Russians and 24% Ukrainians<sup>9</sup>.

The cases of referendums, separatism, and annexation are related to the clash between two principles: the territorial integrity of a country vs. the right of peoples to self-determination. Other examples which show how complicated the matter is: Kosovo and Serbia; Catalonia and Spain; Scotland and the United Kingdom; Cyprus divided between Cypriots with Greek and Turkish identity, etc.

### **3. Identity Politics in the Times of War**

The relations between Russians and Ukrainians have deteriorated because of the war since both sides suffer losses of human life. As a result, Russians and Ukrainians tend to hate each other and are less tolerant. The Russian politicians and media label Ukrainians as “neo-Nazis”, “fascists”, and “nationalists”; the Ukrainian politicians and media label Russians as “orcs”, “rashists”, and even “non-humans.”

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> State Statistics Committee Of Ukraine. General Results of the Census. National Composition of Population: Autonomous Republic of Crimea, [online], 2001. Available from: <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/Crimea/>

The identity politics of Ukraine and Russia mirror each other. In Ukraine, there is suppression of the Russian language and identity and boosting of the Ukrainian language and Identity. In territories controlled by Russia, there is suppression of the Ukrainian language and identity and boosting of Russian language and Identity.

### 3.1. Identity Politics in Ukraine: “Decolonization” and “de-Russification”

Because Russia started the war and attacked Ukraine, stances in Ukraine about Ukrainian citizens with Russian identity are hardening. Russian missiles, planes, and drones kill people and destroy houses, schools, and museums. After the partial destruction of the Crimean Bridge on October 8, 2022, reportedly by Ukrainians, Russian strikes try to cripple the energy infrastructure of the Ukrainian cities which leaves thousands of people without heating, electricity, and water.

The Ukrainian authorities have initiated policies regarded as “decolonization” and “de-Russification”: removing vestiges of the Russian legacy and cultural influence such as removing monuments, changing names of streets and schools, and barriers to studying Russian in Ukrainian schools. The authors of a petition in Ukraine require a law of decolonization to be created<sup>10</sup>. The removing the monuments of the empress Catherine II and the military leader Alexander Suvorov in Odessa are examples of these identity politics. Ukrinform quotes a statement from a Ukrainian politician that “total de-Russification is going to be conducted in Ukraine after the victory over the Russian Federation so nothing Russian to remain in the economy, politics and other spheres”<sup>11</sup>

The Ukrainian strife for changing names of streets, squares, or schools and removing monuments does not affect only political and military leaders from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union but also famous artists and scholars from the 19th and 20th centuries who contributed to the world culture. Several civic organizations in Odessa, for instance, proposed monuments of Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy be removed from public places and to be stored in the Museum of Literature in the city. The monuments of Alexander Pushkin in Uzhgorod and other Ukrainian cities were already removed. Such measures are explained as needed revision of “colonial” heritage.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> УКРИНФОРМ. В Украине зарегистрировали петицию, в которой просят создать закон о деколонизации. [online], 12 авг. 2022. Available from: <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-society/3548929-v-ukraine-zaregistrovali-peticiu-v-kotoroj-prosat-sozdat-zakon-o-dekolonizacii.html>

<sup>11</sup> УКРИНФОРМ. Дерусификация Украины будет происходить естественным путем – Ткаченко, [online], 21 апреля 2022. Available from: <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-society/3463646-derusifikacia-ukrainy-budet-proishodit-estestvennym-putem-tkachenko.html>

<sup>12</sup> УКРИНФОРМ. В Одессе требуют демонтировать памятники Пушкину, Толстому и Горькому, [online], 9 августа 2022. Available from: <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-regions/3546453-v-odesse-trebuut-demontirovat-pamatniki-puskinu-tolstomu-i-gorkomu.html>

The Ukrainian media write “Russia” and “Russian Federation” as well as the names of Russian politicians without capital letters. Sometimes even the names of writers from the 19th century such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are written without capital letters.<sup>13</sup> “War and Peace” was considered by some Ukrainian educators as a novel that glorifies the “orc army” of Russia and as not suitable to be studied in Ukrainian schools.<sup>14</sup> The Ukrainian university students in Lvov propose writers from Russia and Belorussia be excluded from the textbook of foreign literature. Their petition argues that “Our children should not study the literature of those who kill their parents.”<sup>15</sup> The Kharkov University “Karazin” closed its department of Russian literature and instead opened a department of Slavic literature hiring lecturers who teach Polish.<sup>16</sup>

The Ukrainian intellectuals issued a declaration appealing to their colleagues abroad to stop covering Russian culture in the media: “Russian culture, when used as propaganda, is toxic! Don’t be an accomplice!”<sup>17</sup> A petition to study Russophobia as a subject at Ukrainian schools has been even proposed by a Ukrainian rapper. The subject could be taught instead of the Russian language according to the proposition<sup>18</sup>.

There are heated debates in Ukraine whether to exclude Russian writers from studies of foreign literature and what to do with writers who were born on current Ukrainian lands but wrote in Russian, most notably Nikolay Gogol, Mikhail Bulgakov, Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov. Ukrainian politicians reckon that those artists and scholars that were born in current Ukrainian lands or/and wrote about Ukraine should be included in educational programs, nevertheless that they wrote

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<sup>13</sup> УКРИНФОРМ. Пастернак и Толстой в школьной программе: Шкарлет говорит, что решения еще нет, [online], 20 июня 2022. Available from: <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-society/3511120-pasternak-i-tolstoj-v-skolnoj-programme-skarlet-govorit-cto-resenia-ese-net.html>

<sup>14</sup> УКРИНФОРМ. Из школьной программы уберут «Войну и мир» и будут учить детей, как уберечься от мин, [online], 5 мая, 2022. Available from: <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-society/3501567-iz-skolnoj-programmy-uberut-voynu-i-mir-i-budut-ucit-detej-kak-uberecsa-ot-min.html>

<sup>15</sup> УКРИНФОРМ. Львовская власть и студенты призывают исключить российских и белорусских авторов из школьной программы, [online], 4 августа 2022. Available from: <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-regions/3543222-lvovskaa-vlast-i-studenty-prizyvaut-isklucit-rossijskih-i-belorusskih-avtorov-iz-skolnoj-programmy.html>

<sup>16</sup> БОЙКО, Иван. Харьковский университет имени Каразина ликвидировал кафедру русского языка и литературы. УНИАН, [online], 24 апреля 2022. Available from: <https://www.unian.net/society/russkiy-yazyk-i-russkaya-literatura-v-ukraine-v-universitete-harkova-zakryli-neskolko-kafedrnovosti-ukrainy-11878179.html>

<sup>17</sup> UKRINFORM. Ukraine demands cultural sanctions against Russia, [online], 28 Feb. 2022. Available from: <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3415750-ukraine-demands-cultural-sanctions-against-russia.html>

<sup>18</sup> ОРЛОВА, Виолетта. «Ненависть ко всему русскому растет»: в Украине предлагают ввести в школе «русофобию». УНИАН, [online], 2 июля 2022. Available from: <https://www.unian.net/society/agressiya-rossii-v-ukraine-predlagayut-v-vesti-v-shkole-rusofobiyu-novosti-ukrainy-11887485.html>



in Russian and even did not support the independence of Ukraine, such as Mikhail Bulgakov.<sup>19</sup> These debates resemble debates between politicians and scholars in Bulgaria and North Macedonia to establish the ethnic identity of the tzar Samuil or revolutionary Gotze Delchev. Ukraine and Russia even quarrel about whether borscht, a vegetable soup popular in both countries, is a traditional Ukrainian or Russian meal.

The educational ombudsman of Ukraine proposed that in order Russian to be studied at school by a class of students, all students and their parents should agree on that. It would be sufficient for one person to disagree in order Russian language not to be studied.<sup>20</sup> Thus, current language policies of Ukrainian authorities will convince Russians and Russian-speaking people in Ukraine that their rights in Ukraine would be infringed and they would prefer living in territories controlled by Russia.

### **3.2. Identity Politics in Territories under Russian Control: “We Are One People” and Russia as Civilization**

The major effort of identity politics by Russia is to promote the notion that Ukrainians are not a separate nation but they are just a branch of Russians. Both RIA-Novosti and TASS issued a lot of publications that claim that Ukraine should stop being “anti-Russia” and accept its place as a part of the “Russian world” and that Ukraine’s ethnic, linguistic, and religious ties are with Russia, not with the West.<sup>21</sup> The West is depicted as egoistic and aggressive: it promotes and uses Ukraine’s strive for independence, not because of compassion but only to try to weaken Russia creating an enemy on Russia’s borders.

There is Russification in Ukrainian territories under the control of the Russian army: signs in the Ukrainian language are destroyed; only the Russian language can be studied at schools; Ukrainian teachers have to be trained in order to teach in congruence with the Russian educational standards.<sup>22</sup> Ukrainian efforts to erase the

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<sup>19</sup> ГОРДИЕНКО, Виктория. Без Пушкина, но с Гоголем: Минобразования Украины изъяло из учебных программ произведения российских и белорусских авторов. УНИАН, [online], 16 авг. 2022. Available from: <https://www.unian.net/society/minobrazovaniya-ukrainy-izyalo-iz-uchebnyh-programm-proizvedeniya-rossiyskih-i-belorusskih-avtorov-novosti-ukrainy-11943288.html>

<sup>20</sup> ОРЛОВА, Виолетта. Уроки русского могут исчезнуть из украинских школ. УНИАН, [online], 16 апреля 2022. Available from: <https://www.unian.net/society/uroki-russkogo-yazyka-mogut-ischeznut-iz-shkol-podrobnosti-novosti-ukrainy-novosti-ukrainy-11789214.html>

<sup>21</sup> АКОПОВ, Петр. Началась новая стадия демонтажа Украины. РИА-Новости, 11 окт. 2022. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20221011/ukraina-1822952807.html?in=t>

<sup>22</sup> UKRINFORM. Invaders want to Russify all schools in Mariupol – Denisova, [online], 25 May, 2022. Available from: <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3489802-invaders-want-to-russify-all-schools-in-mariupol-denisova.html>



legacy of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union are criticized. The publications of both Russian news agencies argue that there are no genuine Ukrainian culture and history, different from Russian culture and history.

Western sanctions against Russia boost the claim that Russia is a separate civilization, an alternative to the West and Europe: the ideas that Russia is the largest country in the world with a great variety of ethnic and religious groups, or that Russia is self-sufficient and it can survive economically without relations with other countries. Sometimes the notion of the Russian Federation as a civilization itself is combined with the ideology of Eurasianism: the idea that Russia is neither European nor an Asian country but Eurasian. Thus, Russia understands both European and Asian cultures, can deal with any other kind of civilizations and institutions and possesses all positive traits of both European and Asian societies and cultures. For instance, the claim that Islam is an integral part of the Russian civilization, as argued by the Head of Tatarstan, an autonomous republic in the Russian Federation,<sup>23</sup> or that all non-Russian and non-Christian groups in Russia are respected, their culture is cherished and they all contribute to the Russian civilization. The mobilization of more men into the Russian army, many of whom are non-Russians, requires keeping their loyalty and supporting their attachment to Russia. If Russia loses the war, it will trigger separatism of non-Russians and possible disintegration of the Russian Federation.

The view that Russia is a separate civilization and it can seek union with non-European countries in the context of Eurasianism has been expressed by Vladimir Putin in his speech to the International Discussion Club Valdai. His ideas that the West is a declining civilization and Europe could develop as a part of Eurasia have been extensively covered by both Russian news agencies<sup>24</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022 will influence the development of the identity of Ukrainian citizens: for some of them toward Ukrainian identity, for others toward Russian identity. The Ukrainian political and cultural elites are boosting the construction of the Ukrainian identity with the tools of state organization and implementation of policies of “decolonization” and “de-Russification.” The hatred toward Russia as an invader responsible for the death of thousands of Ukrainians and the destruction of their homes is also a significant factor in the development of the separate Ukrainian identity.

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<sup>23</sup> РИА-НОВОСТИ. Минниханов назвал ислам неотъемлемой составляющей российской цивилизации, [online], 3 нояб. 2022. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20221103/islam-1828895600.html>

<sup>24</sup> РИА-НОВОСТИ. Европа могла бы стать частью большой Евразии, заявил Путин. 27 окт. 2022. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20221027/evraziya-1827287401.html>

Both Russia and Ukraine have initiated identity politics aiming to suppress linguistic minorities. This would create division: those Ukrainian citizens who prefer speaking in Russian will develop a Russian identity and would choose to live in territories under Russian control. Those Ukrainian citizens who harbor negative feelings toward Russia will develop or enhance the Ukrainian identity, prefer speaking in Ukrainian, and live in Ukraine. The Ukrainian citizens who are skeptical toward the West and its institutional presentations such as the European Union and NATO would develop Russian identity. In contrast, the Ukrainian citizens who favor Ukraine joining the European Union and NATO would develop Ukrainian identity.

The rise of the ideology of Eurasianism in Russia could be one of the consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Since the United States and the countries from the European Union support Ukraine, Russia would continue to perceive the West as hostile and threatening. Thus, Russia might seek to develop its identity as a Euroasiatic country, whose allies could be China, India, or Iran.

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