

# GIES OCCASIONAL PAPER

THE WAR IN UKRAINE | March 2022

## UKRAINE'S IN-BETWEENNESS: FROM HYBRIDITY TO CENTRALITY

Louise Amoris

Ghent Institute for International and European Studies – Ghent University

---

“We feel like a part of Europe, but may look like a part of Russia. With our thoughts, we are in the West. With our sins, we are in the East”.<sup>1</sup>

The Ukrainian diplomat Olexander Sherba has described Ukraine as a state that has often been rather unknown and undervalued from an outsider's eye. As many 'post-Soviet' states, it has been perceived through the prism of corruption and uncomplete statehood, a marginal actor on the borderlands of Europe, but also of its former Russian imperial 'master' (if we use the postcolonial vocabulary). Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has found itself in a difficult structural position, in-between two cores, in a state that could be described as one of liminality. Liminality refers to a state of ambiguity, of falling in-between existing categories, of being partly-Self partly-Other, “neither here nor there”.<sup>2</sup> This indeterminacy comes from the fact that the liminal actor is in a phase of transition, one that is from a Soviet, unfree, undemocratic past towards a free, democratic, European future from a Ukrainian perspective. Since its independence in 1991, Ukraine has indeed enshrined its future always more strongly towards the West, and the launch of the Russian invasion in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 could well be a determining stepping stone in this journey.

### **Ukraine as the EU's and Russia's 'little Self'**

Before addressing Ukraine's own subjectivity and how it has built its identity in relation to its two big neighbours – the EU and Russia – it is worth observing how Ukraine has been framed by them. After the EU's wide enlargement in 2004, Ukraine has become a direct neighbour (among others) of the community. This led to the formulation of the European Neighbourhood Policy, followed by the Eastern Partnership in 2009, which are policies that come as a substitution to enlargement, to reduce the risks of full exclusion. The side effect of these policies is that they also come to blur the boundaries between the EU's Self and the Others.<sup>3</sup> The neighbours of the Eastern Partnership are framed as the EU's 'potential we',<sup>4</sup> not yet 'good enough' according to the established standards to become full Europeans, but on their way to do so.<sup>5</sup> Through this kind of policies, the EU creates places of liminality, places of transition in which the liminars are supposed to adopt the dominant categories as defined by the core (e.g. democracy, rule of law, governance etc.) to reduce the risks of subversion and secure the EU's own Self, while still refusing to accept them fully within the in-circle.<sup>6</sup> The relationship appears as one between a teacher and a student, the EU expecting Ukraine to learn and progress

towards its model.<sup>7</sup> This representation of Ukraine as the EU's 'little self'<sup>8</sup> is in a way reflected in the latter's refusal to fast-track the Ukrainian application to join the bloc: its aspirations to join the community are acknowledged, the EU wants Ukraine in and considers it as part of the European family, but it is not yet 'ready' to fully join.

From the Russian perspective now, we can also note an ambiguous form of Othering, blurring the lines between the inside and the outside. The very Russian notion of its 'near abroad' underlines this ambiguity, implying that Russia considers the former Soviet Republics as not completely foreign, i.e. as partly-Self. Moreover, referring to 'the Ukraine' has a historical connotation, representing the Ukrainian territory as Russia's borderland, coming from the translation of the Russian word "Okraina". Oskanian argues that Russia articulates its Self as superior in relation to its constructed subalterns which are denied any true agency, with diverging practices depending on whether it looks towards its East or West.<sup>9</sup> Towards its eastern flank, Russia adopts an Orientalist behaviour, bearer of a civilising mission. Towards its Western neighbours, however, the approach is different, promoting a common Slavic authenticity with Russia at its core, as the big brother and protector. This fraternal link uniting Ukraine to Russia has been particularly visible in the Russian discursive escalation, used as an element of justification for the so-called 'special operation'. In the Russian discourse, it is only natural for Ukraine and Russia to be together, they are one people, with Russia playing the role of a protector, as any big brother would do. Ukraine is considered to have no nationhood on its own, again underlining this 'little self' projection coming from Russia. We can note a form of differentiation being made in the Russian official discourse between the genuine Ukrainian people, who naturally belong with their brother Russia, and the threatening Other embodied by Ukrainian authorities, who only are the West's puppets. Here, Ukraine's in-betweenness is framed as a threat, with the argument that its specific

position is being used by the West to contain Russia.<sup>10</sup> Ukraine's choice for a pro-Western liberal democratic path comes as a destabilising factor of the identity discourse the Kremlin is trying to build for the Slavic/Eurasian space around the concept of the 'Russian world'.<sup>11</sup>

### **Ukraine's liminality: from hybridity to marginality**

Where does Ukraine situate itself, in-between these two cores with each their own perception of the country, but which share the similarity of framing it within a hierarchical relationship, as some kind of a 'lesser' or 'little' self? Identity is never something that is fixed, but rather always in flux,<sup>12</sup> and we can note changes in how Ukraine has articulated its own Self in relation to the two cores since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Since its independence, Ukraine has looked towards the West, although civil society and political elites were divided and unstable on how to relate with their neighbours. Depending on the time or the political side, the 'Other' was changing and the perceptions of Russia were balancing between the brother and the enemy,<sup>13</sup> while always trying to maintain limited strategic relations to try and hedge the risks for Ukraine's territorial sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that, before the point of rupture in the relations between Ukraine and Russia in 2014, the former could have seen itself play the role of a bridge between Europe and Russia, "to 'return to Europe' *together* with Russia".<sup>15</sup> This underlined Ukraine's ambiguous positioning that it had strived to turn into an opportunity under Kuchma's presidency (1994-2005), to act as a bridge, to be a dynamic force of connection and rapprochement. The Euromaidan revolution in 2013-2014, followed by the annexation of Crimea by Russia and unrest in the Donbas mark a shift in Ukrainian political discourse, with a re-articulation of its identity now firmly embedded in its European choice, putting an end to the balancing strategy and the perspective of being a bridge with Russia. "[T]here is no longer a debate on Ukraine's

geopolitical choice".<sup>16</sup> Ukraine has strongly framed its identity as one that belongs in Europe in terms of its history, identity and values, therefore aspiring to be accepted within the process of European integration.<sup>17</sup> While no longer being a bridge between Europe and Russia, it has started promoting its role as a bridge between Europe and 'the rest', being a model for other countries 'in transition' towards democracy.<sup>18</sup> The accession to the EU is often presented as a natural way forward and the EU as Ukraine's ally and counter-pole to Russia.<sup>19</sup> We could argue that the main objective for Ukraine has first been to stay away from Russian influence, more than being a European Ukraine as such.<sup>20</sup> Russia is indeed Ukraine's most significant 'Other', familiar but hostile,<sup>21</sup> and it could be contended that Ukraine takes the essence of its identity in opposition to Russia.<sup>22</sup>

In the literature, a distinction is made between hybrid and marginal liminality.<sup>23</sup> The former emerges from "the interstices of crosscutting discourses of identity, which create mismatching categorisations". The latter is "the product of universalising discourses, where liminality designates the constant state of becoming of an actor in search for a place within an established structural arrangement".<sup>24</sup> Before the 2010s, we could argue that Ukraine was in a state of hybrid liminality, "a synthesis of East and West" and "ambivalent category resting in both",<sup>25</sup> embracing its in-between position and at times trying to turn it into strength as a bridge between East and West. The escalating tensions in Ukraine-Russia relations leading to the 2014 shift gave rise to a transformation of Ukraine's liminality into one of marginality. It has strived to be accepted within the European club by engaging in reforms, trying to comply with its standards, without ever being completely successful and thus remaining of the 'edges'.<sup>26</sup> Marginality does not necessarily mean weakness however, and we have seen Ukraine using its 'marginal' position to influence the EU's identity and foreign policy. Indeed, Ukrainian authorities have endeavoured to frame Ukraine as

central for the EU's security, linking it to its future membership against a common Russian threat.<sup>27</sup> It has increasingly projected a representation of itself as a buffer with a protective role for European security against the Russian threat, thus projecting conflictual representations to also engage the EU in its confrontation with Russia. This discursive strategy has reached its peak in the context of the current war in Ukraine, with Ukrainian authorities emphasising how the Russian aggression on Ukraine constitutes a great threat for the whole of Europe, its security architecture, its values. They are framing the conflict as one between democracy against barbarism and authoritarianism, with Ukraine included within the family of the former, in the front row as 'Europe's army', therefore asking for the right to be considered as equal.<sup>28</sup> This strategy did receive some resonance, as the perspective for Ukraine's membership has never been erased from the EU's agenda, and has been put again on the table in light of the ongoing war, with higher support than ever before.

Recognition is essential in the affirmation of one's identity.<sup>29</sup> It would seem that, although the EU recognises Ukraine's Europeanness and still does not close the door for future membership, Ukraine is still not perceived as 'ready' to be part of the in-group. EU discourses emphasise the need to support and reconstruct Ukraine's still 'unperfect' democracy,<sup>30</sup> implying that it is still incomplete. Even if the candidate status finally gets granted to Ukraine, this will not necessarily mean that it will leave its liminal status, as it could still take years before it reaches full membership. Even then, differentiation from the 'real' core could persist, as we can see in the case of the Central Eastern European states which, despite having joined the EU, still remain liminal in relation to the Western core. A normative hierarchy persists between different Europes and Europeans.<sup>31</sup>

## Ukraine's 'own face'

The pitfall in seeing Ukraine as liminal in comparison to the EU is to miss signs of a new nation emerging from below, with 'its own face', emancipated to a certain degree from its two large neighbours, despite still being in-between.<sup>32</sup> These signs were already visible in the Maidan events and would appear reinforced today in the face of the invasion. While Ukraine has often been perceived as a divided country (between a more pro-European West and a more pro-Russian East), many scholars have argued that the Russian aggression has in fact strengthened Ukrainian identity and united the country.<sup>33</sup> In terms of (geo)political preferences, regional divides are fading, the question of language is not so much a determining factor.<sup>34</sup> In Ukraine, we witness the affirmation of a strong civic identity rather than a nationalist project.<sup>35</sup> Before Russian aggression already in 2014, there were no strong, virulent anti-Russian sentiments in the population according to a 2021 study by the Razumkov Centre.<sup>36</sup> Now, however, Ukrainians are united and consolidating their identity around the dichotomy of the democratic Self against the Russian imperial and authoritarian Other.

The Russian invasion of February 2022 most probably marks a point of no return in Ukrainian-Russian relations. According to Makarychev,<sup>37</sup> it will now be difficult for Russia to reconcile the two images representing Ukraine in relation to its own Self: the threatening Other and the brother. It is also uncertain what will happen regarding Ukraine's sense of belonging to the European community. Faced with the lack of receptiveness from Western actors to its repeated calls for integration and assistance, there is a growing sense of disappointment noticeable in Ukrainian official discourses. This first concerns NATO's inaction,<sup>38</sup> but also now the EU's incapacity to "do more" when they refused to fast-track Ukraine's membership application.<sup>39</sup> Despite the numerous signs of support and solidarity, Ukraine stands mostly alone in its fight. This could lead to a stronger affirmation of the "Ukraine as Ukraine" narrative identified by Musliu and Burlyuk, according to which Ukraine is neither East nor West and does not need to be integrated into any regional framework "to become".<sup>40</sup> The responsibility for its present and future would lie in its own hands, as would demonstrate the strong resistance we are witnessing today against Russian aggression.

---

<sup>1</sup> Olexander Sherba, *Ukraine vs. Darkness. Undiplomatic Thoughts* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2021), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner, *The ritual process structure and anti-structure* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 359.

<sup>3</sup> Laure Delcour, "Armenia's and Georgia's contrasted positioning vis-à-vis the EU: between vocal centrality and strategic marginality." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 27, no 4 (2019): 439-450.

<sup>4</sup> Alena Vieira, "The European Union's 'Potential We' between Acceptance and Contestation: Assessing the Positioning of Six Eastern Partnership Countries." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 59, no 2 (2021): 297-315.

<sup>5</sup> Shota Kakabadze, "The East in the West: South Caucasus Between Russia and the European Union." *Polity* 52, no 2 (2020): 273-287.

<sup>6</sup> Bahar Rumelili, "Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion in International Relations." *Review of International Studies* 38, no 2 (2012): 495-508; Maria-Ruxandra Stoicescu, "Communitas and forms without foundations: Romania's case of interlocking liminalities." *Review of International Studies* 38, no 2 (2012): 509-524.

<sup>7</sup> Ondřej Horký-Hluchán and Petr Kratochvíl, "'Nothing is imposed in this policy!' The construction and constriction of the European neighbourhood." *Alternatives* 39, no 4 (2014): 252-270; Petr Kratochvíl, "Discursive constructions of the EU's identity in the neighbourhood: an equal among equals or the power centre." *European Political Economy Review* 9, Autumn (2009): 5-23.

- 
- <sup>8</sup> Maria Ruxandra Stoicescu, *Liminality in International Relations: A Comparative Analysis of Discursive Articulations in the Geopolitical Visions of Romania, Turkey, and Ukraine* (Institute of International and Development Studies, 2008).
- <sup>9</sup> Kevork Oskanian, *Russian Exceptionalism between East and West: The Ambiguous Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).
- <sup>10</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," 2022, accessed February 22, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>
- <sup>11</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Understanding Putin and the Ukraine Crisis*. Presentation at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Online, February 2022.
- <sup>12</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe *Hegemony and Social Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).
- <sup>13</sup> Taras Kuzio, "Identity and nation-building in Ukraine: Defining the 'other'," *Ethnicities* 1, no 3 (2001): 343-365.
- <sup>14</sup> Karina Shyrokykh, "The evolution of the foreign policy of Ukraine: External actors and domestic factors," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no 5 (2018): 832-850.
- <sup>15</sup> Taras Kuzio, "Identity and nation-building in Ukraine", 360.
- <sup>16</sup> Vera Axyonova and Diana Zubko, "The European Union through the Eyes of Ukrainian Think Tankers: Studying EU Perceptions Post-Euromaidan," *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal* 0, no 3 (2017): 197.
- <sup>17</sup> Karina Shyrokykh, "The evolution of the foreign policy of Ukraine".
- <sup>18</sup> Vjosa Musliu and Olga Burlyuk, "Imagining Ukraine: From history and myths to Maidan protests." *East European Politics and Societies* 33, no 3 (2019): 631-655.
- <sup>19</sup> Vera Axyonova and Diana Zubko, "The European Union through the Eyes of Ukrainian Think Tankers".
- <sup>20</sup> Vjosa Musliu and Olga Burlyuk, "Imagining Ukraine".
- <sup>21</sup> Kornely Kakachia, Bidzina Lebanidze and Volodymyr Dubovyk, "Defying marginality: explaining Ukraine's and Georgia's drive towards Europe," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 27, no 4 (2019): 451-462.
- <sup>22</sup> Vjosa Musliu and Olga Burlyuk, "Imagining Ukraine".
- <sup>23</sup> Dylan M.H. Loh and Jaakko Heiskanen, "Liminal sovereignty practices: Rethinking the inside/outside dichotomy," *Cooperation and Conflict* 55, no 3 (2020): 284-304; Bahar Rumelili, "Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion".
- <sup>24</sup> Maria-Ruxandra Stoicescu, "Communitas and forms without foundations," 512.
- <sup>25</sup> Ivan L. Rudnytsky, 1987, cited in Vjosa Musliu and Olga Burlyuk, "Imagining Ukraine", 5.
- <sup>26</sup> Kornely Kakachia, Bidzina Lebanidze and Volodymyr Dubovyk, "Defying marginality".
- <sup>27</sup> Christopher S. Browning and George Christou, "The constitutive power of outsiders: The European neighbourhood policy and the eastern dimension," *Political Geography* 29, no 2 (2010): 109-118.
- <sup>28</sup> RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service, "Zelenskiy Calls For Ukraine's Immediate EU Membership But Bloc Cool On Idea," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, last modified February 28, 2022, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-eu-membership-zelenskiy/31728332.html>; Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "Interview: David Muir Reporting. ABC News Exclusive." Accessed March 14 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/video/zelenskyy-interview-david-muir-reporting-abc-news-exclusive-83309456>
- <sup>29</sup> Danijela Čanji and Aliaksei Kazharski, "When the "subaltern empire" speaks. On recognition, Eurasian integration, and the Russo-Georgian war," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (2022): 1-28.
- <sup>30</sup> Council of Europe, "Informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government. Versailles Declaration.", Accessed on March 14 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>; Ursula Von der Leyen, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Munich Security Conference 2022," Accessed on February 22, 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_22\\_1221](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_22_1221)
- <sup>31</sup> Maria Mälksoo, "The normative threat of subtle subversion: the return of 'Eastern Europe' as an ontological insecurity trope," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no 3 (2019): 365-383.
- <sup>32</sup> Alexandr Osipian, "Україна все же обрела собственное лицо" [Ukraine Managed to Acquire a Face of Its Own]. *Ab Imperio*, 3 (2014).
- <sup>33</sup> Paul D'Anieri, *Rethinking Sovereignty*. Symposium conducted at TCUP Conference: Beyond Borderland: 30 Years of Ukrainian Sovereignty, Harvard University, Online, February 2022; Taras Kuzio,

---

"Euromaidan revolution, Crimea and Russia–Ukraine war: why it is time for a review of Ukrainian–Russian studies," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 59, no 3-4 (2018): 529-553.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Vjosa Musliu and Olga Burlyuk, "Imagining Ukraine"; Olga Onuch, *Contested Identities and State-Making in the Post-Soviet Space*, Symposium conducted at the Association for the Study of Nationalities, Online, January 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Faustine Vincent, "Kiev satisfait de l'« unité » de ses partenaires face à Moscou," *Le Monde*, January 13, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Andrey Makarychev *The Russian Geopolitical Crescendo: Lessons for the International Relations Theory*. Seminar at the Institute of European Studies and International Relations of the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University, Online, March 2022.

<sup>38</sup> "War in Ukraine, Day 10: Ukraine disappointed and outraged by NATO's "inaction". *Euromaidan Press*, March 5, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Volodymyr Zelenskyy, We have already reached a strategic turning point and are moving towards our goal, our victory, last modified March 11, 2022, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-vzhe-dosyagli-strategichnogo-perelomu-i-jdemo-do-nashoyi-73493>

<sup>40</sup> Vjosa Musliu and Olga Burlyuk, "Imagining Ukraine", 15.