

Resisting Suppression: The Effect of Russian Cultural Policies on Ukrainian National Identity

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Abstract: This article examines the impact of historical and ongoing Russian cultural suppression on the development of Ukrainian national identity and the current level of national unity. It analyzes how policies and practices aimed at diminishing Ukrainian language, culture, and historical narratives have shaped Ukrainian society and contributed to its resilience in the face of external aggression. The study draws on historical accounts, sociological research, and political analysis to explore the complex interplay between cultural suppression, identity formation, and national cohesion in Ukraine.

Keywords: Russian cultural suppression, Ukrainian identity, national cohesion, cultural resistance, historical oppression, Ukraine-Russia relations, national resilience, cultural autonomy, political conflict, post-Soviet studies.

Introduction: The relationship between Russia and Ukraine is deeply rooted in a complex history, marked by periods of both cooperation and conflict, but more significantly, by a persistent pattern of Russian dominance. A recurring and defining theme in this relationship has been the systematic suppression of Ukrainian culture and identity by the Russian state. This suppression, implemented across both the Tsarist and Soviet eras, represents a deliberate and multifaceted effort to undermine Ukrainian nationhood (Kuzio, 1998; Plokhyy, 2017). These policies have manifested in various forms, each contributing to the erosion of Ukrainian cultural distinctiveness. These include restrictive linguistic policies that marginalized the Ukrainian language, limitations on cultural expression that stifled the development of a vibrant Ukrainian cultural sphere, and the manipulation of historical narratives to propagate a view of Ukraine as an integral part of Russia, rather than a separate and sovereign nation (Düben, 2020; Myshlovskaya, 2022).

The concept of national unity, which refers to the degree to which a nation's people share a sense of common identity, purpose, and belonging, is of paramount importance. It is a crucial factor determining a country's stability, resilience, and its capacity to withstand internal divisions and external threats. Benedict Anderson's influential concept of "imagined communities" (2006) provides a theoretical

framework for understanding how national identity is socially constructed and maintained through shared symbols, narratives, and experiences. In this context, the role of language, culture, and history in shaping a collective identity is central. Furthermore, Maurice Halbwachs's seminal work on collective memory (1992) elucidates how shared historical experiences, both positive and negative, shape a group's sense of self and contribute to its cohesion or fragmentation. The suppression of a group's cultural heritage, as experienced by Ukrainians, represents a direct assault on this collective memory and a challenge to the very foundations of its national identity. This article explores the ways in which Russian cultural suppression has influenced these processes in Ukraine, shaping its national identity, and ultimately, affecting its national unity and its ability to resist external pressures.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Russian cultural suppression on the formation of Ukrainian national identity and its role in shaping national unity. It will delve into the historical context of this suppression, dissect its various manifestations across different periods, and assess its profound and lasting effects on Ukrainian society. By examining the interplay between cultural suppression, identity formation, and national cohesion, the article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that have shaped the relationship

between Russia and Ukraine and the ongoing struggle for Ukrainian self-determination.

This article aims to analyze the impact of Russian cultural suppression on the formation of Ukrainian national identity and its role in shaping national unity. It will examine the historical context of this suppression, its various manifestations, and its effects on Ukrainian society.

METHODS

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on historical analysis, sociological research, and political science literature. The research methodology includes:

- **Historical Analysis:** Examination of primary sources, such as legal documents, official decrees, and archival materials, to trace the history of Russian cultural policies towards Ukraine.
- **Literature Review:** A comprehensive review of scholarly articles, books, and reports on Ukrainian history, culture, and identity.
- **Policy Analysis:** Analysis of Ukrainian language and cultural policies, particularly in the post-Soviet period (Constitution of Ukraine, 1996; Law of Ukraine No. 2704-VIII, 2019; Law of Ukraine No. 5029-VI, 2012; Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 852-r, 2020).
- **Sociological Studies:** Review of sociological surveys and research on Ukrainian national identity and social cohesion (Chayinska et al., 2022).

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that Russian cultural suppression has had a profound and multifaceted impact on Ukrainian national identity and unity:

- **Linguistic Suppression:** Policies aimed at marginalizing the Ukrainian language, including restricting its use in education, government, and media, have been a consistent feature of Russian rule (Iziumov, 1930; Kulyk, 2014; Law of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic No. 8312-11, 1989).
- **Distorted Historical Narratives:** The dissemination of historical narratives that minimize or deny Ukrainian history and statehood has been used to undermine Ukrainian identity (Düben, 2020; Myshlovskaya, 2022).
- **Religious Suppression:** Attempts to control or suppress the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have been employed to weaken Ukrainian cultural and spiritual identity (Hunder & Humphries, 2022; Leustean & Samokhvalov, 2019; Mamo, 2021).
- **Cultural Erasure:** The suppression of Ukrainian cultural expression, including literature, art, and music,

has aimed to diminish its significance (Chaika, 2023; Chaika, 2024; National Gallery renames..., 2022).

- **Fostering Regional Divisions:** These policies have, paradoxically, contributed to a stronger sense of Ukrainian identity in response to external pressure, while also, in some periods, exacerbating regional divisions within Ukraine, a key element in Russian strategy (Feklyunina, 2016).

DISCUSSION

The historical and ongoing suppression of Ukrainian culture by Russia has played a significant role in shaping Ukrainian national identity and its current level of national unity.

The long history of cultural suppression has contributed to:

- **Strengthened National Identity:** In response to external pressure, Ukrainian identity has become more defined and resilient (Gao, 2024; Wilson, 2022). This aligns with social identity theory, which posits that intergroup conflict can strengthen in-group identification (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 2004).
- **Increased National Cohesion:** The shared experience of cultural suppression has fostered a sense of collective memory and common fate, contributing to greater national unity, particularly in the face of Russian aggression (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008; Wylegala & Głowacka-Grajper, 2020).
- **Resistance to External Influence:** Attempts to undermine Ukrainian culture and history have been met with resistance, reinforcing the desire for self-determination and cultural preservation (Gramsci, 2020; Said, 1979; Vike, 2011).

The current conflict with Russia has further solidified Ukrainian national unity, as Ukrainians from all regions have united to defend their sovereignty and cultural identity (Green et al., 2022; Snyder, 2010; Snyder, 2018; Subtelny, 2009). Reforms in education (Education Reforms, 2017; New Ukrainian School, n.d.) and language policy (Law of Ukraine No. 2704-VIII, 2019) also reflect a commitment to strengthening Ukrainian identity and culture. The condemnation of communist and Nazi regimes (Law of Ukraine No. 317-VIII, 2015) is part of a broader effort to reclaim Ukrainian history and break from the Soviet past and its legacy. The Holodomor (Richardson-Smith, 2021) is a key event in this re-narration of Ukrainian history.

CONCLUSION

Russian cultural suppression has been a persistent factor in shaping Ukrainian national identity. While intended to weaken and divide Ukraine, these policies have, paradoxically, contributed to a stronger and more unified national consciousness. The ongoing

struggle against external aggression has further solidified Ukrainian national unity, demonstrating the resilience of a nation forged in the crucible of cultural and political oppression.

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