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BETWEEN SOVIET HERITAGE AND THE EUROPEAN VECTOR: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL RHETORIC IN SHAPING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN UKRAINE (1991-2004)

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Abstract

This article explores the formative role of political rhetoric in constructing and contesting national identity in Ukraine during the post-Soviet period of 1991-2004. In a transitional context marked by institutional fragility, historical ambivalence, and regional polarization, political elites deployed rhetoric not only to reflect societal change but to actively shape collective imaginaries. Situated between the ideological legacy of the Soviet Union and the aspirational pull of European integration, Ukrainian political actors used discourse to navigate competing visions of sovereignty, identity, and geopolitical orientation.

The study draws upon a broad empirical base, including presidential speeches, opposition discourse, party manifestos, electoral rhetoric, and symbolic statements. Using a combined methodology of political discourse analysis, content analysis, and sociological interpretation, the article traces identity narratives across four dimensions: memory politics (e.g., Holodomor, WWII), foreign policy alignment (Europe vs. Russia), language and cultural policy, and regional fragmentation.

Special attention is given to the contrasting rhetorical strategies of Presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, alongside opposition figures such as Vyacheslav Chornovil, Viktor Yushchenko, Yulia Tymoshenko, and Petro Symonenko. The findings show that rhetoric served as a key mechanism of political legitimation and socialization, reinforcing generational and regional cleavages while laying the semantic groundwork for Ukraine's emerging European orientation.

Kravchuk's discourse affirmed independence while maintaining symbolic continuity, relying on notions of unity, legality, and cultural inclusiveness to stabilise the early post-Soviet state. In contrast, Kuchma institutionalised a rhetoric of strategic ambiguity: balancing Soviet nostalgia and economic reliance on Russia with growing appeals to European integration and democratic modernity.

Oppositional rhetoric challenged this ambivalence by articulating alternative identity projects. Figures such as Vyacheslav Chornovil, Viktor Yushchenko, and Yulia Tymoshenko offered competing narratives grounded in civic nationalism, European orientation, and historical justice. Their discourses mobilised younger generations and regional communities in Western and Central Ukraine, particularly through the reframing of the Holodomor, advocacy for Ukrainian as the sole state language, and emphasis on democratic reform. These rhetorical strategies laid the semantic groundwork for subsequent pro-European mobilisations, including the Orange Revolution. Meanwhile, leftist and pro-Soviet actors, especially the Communist Party of Ukraine, preserved a counter-narrative centred on Soviet achievements, Russian cultural affinity, and economic stability.

Keywords: national identity, political rhetoric, post-Soviet Ukraine, collective memory, European integration, discourse analysis, political communication

МІЖ РАДЯНСЬКОЮ СПАДЩИНОЮ ТА ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКИМ ВЕКТОРОМ: РІЛЬ ПОЛІТИЧНОЇ РИТОРИКИ У ФОРМУВАННІ НАЦІОНАЛЬНОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ В УКРАЇНІ (1991-2004)

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Анотація

У статті досліджується формувальна роль політичної риторики у конструюванні та переосмисленні національної ідентичності в Україні в пострадянський період 1991-2004 років. У контексті інституційної нестабільності, історичної багатозначності та регіональної поляризації українські політичні еліти використовували риторику не лише для відображення суспільних змін, а й для активного формування колективних уявлень про націю, державу й майбутнє. Політичний дискурс виступав ключовим інструментом навігації між спадщиною радянської ідеології та прагненням до європейської інтеграції.

У роботі використано широку емпіричну базу, що включає президентські промови, дискурси опозиції, партійні маніфести, виборчу риторику та символічні заяви. На основі поєднання політичного дискурс-аналізу, контент-аналізу та інтерпретації соціологічних даних проаналізовано чотири ключові виміри риторичного формування ідентичності: політика пам'яті (Голодомор, Друга світова війна), геополітична орієнтація (Європа / Росія), мовно-культурна політика та регіональна фрагментація.

Особливу увагу приділено контрастним риторичним стратегіям президентів Леоніда Кравчука і Леоніда Кучми, а також опозиційних діячів: В'ячеслава Чорновола, Віктора Ющенка, Юлії Тимошенко та Петра Симоненка. Встановлено, що риторика не лише легітимізувала політичні курси, а й слугувала засобом політичної соціалізації, поглиблюючи вікові та регіональні розломи й водночас формуючи смислові основи європейського вектору розвитку.

Дискурс Кравчука стверджував незалежність, зберігаючи символічну безперервність, спираючись на поняття єдності, законності та культурної інклюзивності для стабілізації ранньої пострадянської держави. На противагу цьому, Кучма інституціоналізував риторику стратегічної неоднозначності: балансуючи ностальгію за радянським часом та економічну залежність від Росії зі зростаючими закликами до європейської інтеграції та демократичної сучасності.

Опозиційна риторика кинула виклик цій амбівалентності, артикулюючи альтернативні проекти ідентичності. Такі постаті, як В'ячеслав Чорновіл, Віктор Ющенко та Юлія Тимошенко, пропонували конкуруючі наративи, що ґрунтувалися на громадянському націоналізмі, європейській орієнтації та історичній справедливості. Їхні дискурси мобілізували молодші покоління та регіональні громади у Західній та Центральній Україні, зокрема, через переосмислення Голодомору, відстоювання української мови як єдиної державної мови та акцент на демократичних реформах. Ці риторичні стратегії заклали семантичну основу для подальших проєвропейських мобілізацій, включаючи Помаранчеву революцію. Тим часом ліві та прорадянські діячі, особливо Комуністична партія України, зберегли контрнратив, зосереджений на радянських досягненнях, російській культурній спорідненості та економічній стабільності.

Ключові слова: національна ідентичність, політична риторика, пострадянська Україна, колективна пам'ять, європейська інтеграція, дискурс-аналіз, політична комунікація

Problem statement. In post-Soviet countries, the decommunization process emerged as a critical factor in shaping the national identity and reevaluating historical narratives. In Ukraine, the post-Soviet period from 1991 to 2004 was marked by efforts to distance the nation from its Soviet past, both politically and culturally. The main mechanism of this transformation was the use of political rhetoric, which not only reflected societal shifts but actively contributed to their construction. Political discourse, particularly in public speeches and official statements, served as a critical tool for shaping collective memory, legitimizing reforms, and promoting a national identity that was distinct from Soviet ideological narratives.

A significant body of research confirms the importance of political rhetoric in shaping the national identity. For example, R. Wodak, R. Cillia, M. Reisigl and K. Liebhart (Wodak et al., 2009: 25-26) highlight that political discourse plays a central role in constructing collective identities by embedding them within specific historical and cultural contexts. P. Chilton, in turn, emphasizes that rhetorical strategies, such as the selection of historical narratives and symbolic language, are crucial for distinguishing between 'us' and 'them' (Chilton, 2004: 15-18). Such distinctions are particularly effective when there is a need to distance oneself from an undesirable historical legacy. However, in the Ukrainian context, such delineation has led to the exacerbation of a security dilemma both at the domestic and international levels. The historical experience of territorial division within modern Ukrainian lands has resulted in a certain polarization of identities in different regions of independent Ukraine. Each region expressed views and actions seeking to protect its interests and security, which others perceived as threats. Similarly, in the international arena, Ukraine's European aspirations and its efforts to distance itself from its Soviet legacy were perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its geopolitical interests. In response, Russia exploited regional differences through propaganda, support for separatist movements, and direct military intervention.

Therefore this chapter examines the political discourse of independent Ukraine in the period 1991-2004 and its impact on the transformation of the national identity. During this period, political rhetoric created a framework for discussing national priorities, historical events and the geopolitical vector of the country's development, and thus served as a key marker in the formation and transformation of the identity of Ukrainian society. The study uses a combined approach that includes political discourse analysis, content analysis of public speeches, interviews and programmes of political leaders, as well as sociological analysis of the reaction of Ukrainian society to political messages broadcast in different periods of time from 1991 to 2004. Political discourse analysis allows us to explore the evolution of political rhetoric and how Ukrainian political leaders have adapted their rhetorical strategies to address new challenges and opportunities. Content analysis, in turn, is used to identify and classify recurring motifs and key messages in political rhetoric in 1991-2004:

- Historical memory (Soviet past, 20th-century national liberation movements);
- Geopolitical orientations (Europe/Russia);
- Regional polarization (East and West Ukraine, Crimea's status);
- Language issues (status of the Russian language).

Sociological analysis (based on statistics of electoral support for political leaders and independent sociological surveys on Ukrainians' national self-identity) helps to understand the level and nature of public support for certain narratives that were actively disseminated in Ukraine's political discourse during the studied period.

This combined methodological framework allows for a detailed exploration of how political rhetoric not only reflected societal transformations but also actively contributed to the formation of the collective memory and the ideological foundations of Ukraine's post-Soviet identity.

This study focuses specifically on the period capturing the rhetorical build-up to the 2004 Orange Revolution, examining the stage in which identity-building mechanisms were

being gradually accumulated and negotiated, rather than publicly manifested through mass mobilization. By concentrating on the formative phase of discursive identity construction – culminating in its symbolic eruption during the Orange Revolution – the article highlights how political rhetoric laid the semantic and symbolic groundwork for future political realignment without yet reaching its full performative institutionalization.

Analysis of research and publications. The issue of national identity in post-Soviet Ukraine has been the focus of substantial scholarly inquiry, both within the country and internationally. Researchers have emphasized the pivotal role of political rhetoric as a mechanism for negotiating identity in a state undergoing profound political, social, and cultural transformation.

Among Ukrainian scholars, significant contributions have been made by Yaroslav Hrytsak, who has explored the historical construction of Ukrainian identity through competing regional narratives and emphasized the long-term effects of imperial legacies on modern political discourse (Hrytsak, 2011). Volodymyr Kulyk has extensively analysed language politics and the role of state discourse in shaping ethno-national belonging, particularly in the context of media, education, and memory policy (Kulyk, 2011; 2016). Natalia Yakovenko has underscored the role of symbolic capital and historical mythmaking in the formation of national consciousness, arguing that the post-Soviet political elite actively reappropriated both Soviet and pre-Soviet tropes to legitimize authority (Yakovenko, 2000).

From a political science perspective, Mykola Riabchuk has highlighted the persistent division between ‘two Ukraines’ as a rhetorical and structural reality, shaped by different value systems, historical experiences, and geopolitical aspirations (Riabchuk, 2015). His work, alongside that of Olexiy Haran (Haran, 1998), has drawn attention to the identity differences between the ‘nationally conscious’ West/Centre and the ‘post-Soviet’ East/South, emphasizing that these were not static divisions but evolving fields of symbolic contestation influenced by political leadership and public discourse.

On the international level, scholars such as Taras Kuzio (Kuzio, 2000) have researched on Ukraine’s ideological pluralism and identity politics, noting the strategic deployment of historical memory by political elites. Serhy Yekelchuk (Yekelchuk, 2007) has examined the instrumentalisation of the Soviet past, especially through the politics of memory around the Holodomor and World War II. Andrew Wilson (Wilson, 2015) has explored how Ukrainian politicians manipulate regional identities and use rhetoric to manufacture political legitimacy, while also warning of the risks posed by identity-based populism.

Linguistic and discourse scholars such as Ruth Wodak and Paul Chilton have provided methodological tools essential for analysing political rhetoric (Wodak et al., 2009). Discourse-Historical Approach demonstrates how identity is embedded within historically charged language and symbolic constructions. Chilton (Chilton, 2004) argues that political rhetoric is fundamentally about boundary-making – an especially relevant observation for post-imperial states redefining their sense of self.

Despite this robust body of scholarship, there remains a gap in diachronic studies that trace the evolution of political rhetoric over time in Ukraine, especially in the pre-Orange Revolution period. Existing literature tends to focus either on cultural identity or geopolitical alignment but rarely analyses rhetorical strategies in a comparative, longitudinal framework. This article addresses that lacuna by examining how political actors from 1991 to 2004 employed rhetoric to construct, reinforce, or challenge visions of national identity. It positions political discourse as both a site of elite contestation and a formative influence on public consciousness and identity consolidation.

Primary purpose. The primary objective of this study is to critically analyse the evolution of political rhetoric in Ukraine from 1991 to 2004 and its role in shaping national identity in the post-Soviet era. The article aims to uncover how different political actors, through public speeches, official statements, and symbolic narratives, constructed competing visions of Ukraine’s identity, balancing between its Soviet past and European

future. By analysing discourse across presidential terms and oppositional platforms, the study reveals the extent to which political rhetoric contributed to the polarisation or consolidation of national identity.

Political rhetoric of 1991-1994. The years following Ukraine's independence in 1991 witnessed profound political, social, and economic transformations. These shifts often resembled a state of crisis rather than deliberate reform. Nevertheless, decommunization has become a central theme in Ukraine's political discourse, reflecting active efforts to distance the country from its Soviet past and pave a new path to sovereignty and democracy (Kuzio, 2000; Yekelchuk, 2007). It is worth noting that virtually all political leaders of independent Ukraine adopted a position of distancing themselves from the Soviet past and emphasised the impossibility of returning to the status of a proto-union similar to the USSR. At the same time, due to the close ties to the common economy of all former Soviet republics, lack of resources and political experience, 'anti-Soviet' messages were not reinforced by the systematic dismantling of Soviet state structures and the development of their own national institutions, which was vital for the cultural revival and regional unity of the Ukrainian nation at that time. As A. Wilson has noted, the decommunization efforts of 1991-1994 were particularly challenging because the political landscape was shaped by the competing realities of the newly formed Ukraine (Wilson, 2015). On the one hand, there was a strong push to assert the country's independence and develop a national identity through reforms, symbolic actions and the reassessment of historical narratives. On the other hand, economic difficulties, historical regional polarisation and longstanding ties with Russia have posed significant obstacles to the implementation of this strategy.

Leonid Kravchuk, Ukraine's first post-Soviet president, played a formative role in redefining the national political rhetoric at a pivotal historical juncture. As a former high-ranking member of the Communist Party, his early post-independence discourse exhibited a deliberate ambiguity toward the Soviet past. This rhetorical strategy – marked by reserved critique and emphasis on personal deception by the Party leadership (Interview with Leonid Kravchuk..., 1992) – can be interpreted as an attempt to distance both him and the nascent Ukrainian polity from complicity in the totalitarian regime. Rather than fostering a critical reassessment of the Soviet legacy, Kravchuk's narrative enabled a collective self-exoneration, presenting the Ukrainian populace as passive victims of ideological manipulation. This interpretive frame, while politically expedient, hindered deeper societal reckoning and allowed continuity in elite legitimacy.

Kravchuk's rhetoric consistently pivoted toward constructing a forward-looking narrative centered on sovereignty and historical rupture. Phrases such as Ukraine's "transition from one era to another" (Kravchuk's speech at the UN General Assembly, 1993) and declarations of national ownership – "We are the owners of our land..." – signaled a symbolic break with the Soviet past (New Year's greetings from L.M. Kravchuk..., 2015). However, this rhetorical rupture was not underpinned by a comprehensive ideological or institutional disengagement. Rather, it was a performative realignment aimed at establishing Ukraine's normative orientation toward democracy and international integration, as evidenced by Kravchuk's emphasis on human rights and international law in his 1993 UN speech (Kravchuk's speech at the UN General Assembly, 1993).

The exception to Kravchuk's otherwise restrained treatment of the Soviet legacy was his unambiguous condemnation of the Holodomor. Labeling it a "genocide... by directive from another centre" (60th anniversary of the Holodomor in Ukraine, 2019), he appealed to historical justice while externalizing culpability. This rhetorical move simultaneously solidified a victim-centered national identity and positioned the Soviet regime as the 'other' – a crucial discursive device in forging a post-colonial narrative. Scholars such as R.D. Marples identify this framing as instrumental in laying the identity-forming base for the later legal recognition of the Holodomor as genocide (Marples, 2007: 197-203).

While Kravchuk's rhetoric signalled a discursive rupture with the Soviet past, it

simultaneously reflected a realist understanding of Ukraine's structural dependencies, particularly in relation to Russia. His inaugural address in December 1991 framed bilateral relations with former Soviet republics, especially Russia, in terms of shared geopolitical legacy, economic interdependence, and cultural proximity (Kravchuk, 1991). The repetition of this motif in Kravchuk's public statements during the early 1990s reveals a conscious effort to manage the security dilemma inherent in Ukraine's geopolitical position. The establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was, in this context, not merely a political compromise but an instrument for de-escalating potential post-Soviet conflict. As V. Tretyakov (Tretyakov, 2013) noted, the CIS was conceived as a mechanism to avert ethnic and territorial confrontation, an objective consistent with Ukraine's emphasis on regional stability over bloc reformation.

Kravchuk's rhetorical support for the CIS, however, was contingent on the premise of sovereign equality – a vision that increasingly diverged from the reality of Moscow's centripetal ambitions. His 1992 statement rejecting Ukraine's subordination to CIS supranational structures underscored this tension, highlighting the limits of interdependence when confronted with asymmetrical power dynamics. His insistence on Ukraine's psychological decolonization – challenging both Ukraine's inherited peripheral status and Russia's self-perception as a post-imperial center – was part of a broader discursive strategy to reframe regional hierarchies (Interview with Leonid Kravchuk..., 1992).

Despite rhetorical affirmations of sovereignty, Kravchuk remained acutely aware of the material constraints facing Ukraine. His assertion that severing ties with Russia 'in one spirit' would entail socioeconomic harm reflected not only a pragmatic calculus but also an understanding of the depth of societal entanglement between the two states (Transcript of the plenary session, 1992). Public opinion data from 1993 confirm this ambivalence: while a significant share of Ukrainians perceived Russia's foreign policy as imperial (35%) and bilateral relations as tense or hostile (65%), a parallel majority reported deep interpersonal, familial, and cultural ties to Russians (Poll on relations between Ukraine and Russia in 1993, 2017). This duality – geopolitical caution amidst societal closeness – exemplifies the discursive complexity of early Ukrainian identity construction, caught between the legacies of Soviet integration and the aspirations of sovereign nationhood.

Kravchuk's geopolitical strategy was grounded in a rhetorical and institutional commitment to a multi-vector foreign policy, in which European integration occupied a symbolically privileged position. From the outset of his presidency, Kravchuk consistently framed Ukraine as a "great European power" – a discursive gesture that transcended mere diplomatic orientation and sought to anchor national identity within the civilizational framework of Europe. His inaugural statement that "Ukraine is a European state... [with] political, economic and humanitarian ties" to the continent (Kravchuk, 1991) not only articulated foreign policy priorities but also performed an act of normative positioning, aligning Ukraine with democratic and post-imperial narratives prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe at the time. This rhetorical Europeanism was substantiated through tangible diplomatic moves. Ukraine's accession to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (January 1992), its application to the Council of Europe (July 1992), and the 1994 signing of the EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement – the first among post-Soviet republics – functioned as institutional anchors for Kravchuk's westward vector. These steps, although constrained in material impact, were symbolically significant: they positioned Ukraine not as a peripheral post-Soviet state, but as an aspirant member of the European community of values. In this regard, Kravchuk's leadership must be viewed not only as transitional but also as constitutive in shaping a long-term trajectory of European integration.

Domestically, Kravchuk's political rhetoric exhibited a careful balancing act between affirming Ukrainian sovereignty and maintaining interethnic stability in a linguistically and ethnically diverse polity. His discourse on Russians in Ukraine, particularly in relation to Crimea and Donbas, was marked by conciliatory pragmatism. Referring to territories

historically populated by Russians as 'common' lands and explicitly rejecting the label 'national minority' in favor of "friendly fraternal people" (Tretyakov, 2013), Kravchuk sought to de-escalate ethno-political tensions through inclusive language. This approach reflected an early attempt to construct a civic model of nationhood that could encompass multiple identities without undermining the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state.

Similarly, his stance on the Russian language was framed through legal and symbolic gestures of accommodation. By endorsing parliamentary decisions that allowed for the functional coexistence of Ukrainian and regional languages, Kravchuk attempted to defuse the politicization of language and promote societal cohesion. His own use of Russian in public addresses further reinforced this strategy, presenting it not as a concession, but as a pragmatic communicative bridge – especially in the post-Soviet context where Russian remained a *lingua franca*.

The question of Crimea's status emerged as a litmus test for Ukraine's internal cohesion and territorial integrity during Kravchuk's presidency. As separatist sentiment gained traction on the peninsula and Russian geopolitical interests intensified – particularly around the Black Sea Fleet – Kravchuk's rhetoric articulated a vision of autonomy that simultaneously acknowledged regional distinctiveness and reaffirmed national unity. His consistent emphasis that Crimea's autonomous status was legitimised by popular will reflected a strategic invocation of democratic principles to counter both external claims and internal fragmentation (Tretyakov, 2013).

This position was situated within a broader rhetorical project that framed Ukraine as a multinational polity bound by legal equality and civic allegiance, rather than ethnic homogeneity. Kravchuk's assertion that "we must build a state where all people are equal... but there are certain nuances regarding the indigenous people" (Leonid Kravchuk in Ternopil., 2017) reveals the tension between ethnocultural recognition and the imperative of inclusive citizenship. His reluctance to codify ethnonational primacy in constitutional terms suggests a prioritisation of social stability over identity-based statecraft.

Taken together, Kravchuk's domestic and foreign policy rhetoric reveals a coherent strategy of identity construction based on pluralism, moderation, and geopolitical flexibility. While this conciliatory stance can be seen as a delay in the consolidation of a distinct Ukrainian national consciousness, it can also be seen as a deliberate strategy by the first Ukrainian president to accommodate internal diversity without sacrificing coherence. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Kravchuk's rhetoric functioned not merely as transitional narrative but as a foundational element in the reconfiguration of Ukrainian national identity within a post-Soviet discursive field.

In contrast, Kravchuk's main electoral opponent in 1991, Vyacheslav Chornovil, espoused a more radical national agenda rooted in his dissident past and rejection of Soviet imperialism. His characterisation of the USSR as a 'rotten Russian empire' exemplified a confrontational narrative that privileged rupture over continuity (Vyacheslav Chornovil "The rotten Russian empire is collapsing", 2014).

Chornovil's political project focused on eliminating the remnants of Soviet rule by denationalizing public life and replacing administrative centralism with democratic pluralism (Vyacheslav Chornovil: Election speech on television, 1991). His dichotomy of 'reformers' versus 'stabilisers' framed the election not merely as a contest of policy, but as a struggle over competing visions of post-Soviet statehood.

Despite his association with national dissent and political radicalism, Vyacheslav Chornovil articulated a surprisingly moderate stance on issues of language and minority rights during the 1991 presidential campaign. His rejection of retaliatory ethnolinguistic policies – despite acknowledging the long-standing Russification of Ukraine – reflected an effort to distance Ukrainian national-democratic position from exclusionary or retributive narratives. By drawing a distinction between the Russian language and communist ideology, Chornovil affirmed the legitimacy of Russian linguistic presence in Ukraine, aligning his position with liberal-democratic principles of pluralism.

Chornovil's rhetorical sensitivity to identity-laden terms (rejection of such terms as

‘moskal’ and ‘banderivets’) – demonstrates his awareness of the dangers posed by ethnoregional polarization in the newly independent state. His proposal to substitute these divisive markers with the term ‘soborni people’ was more than semantic; it constituted an attempt to forge a unifying civic identity rooted in mutual respect and regional diversity (Presidential candidate televised debates., 1991). Nevertheless, his valorization of Eastern Galicia – framing it as the Ukrainian ‘Piedmont’ and the epicenter of national revival – inevitably reinforced perceptions of his candidacy as representative of Western Ukraine, with Lviv positioned symbolically as its political capital (Vyacheslav Chornovil “The rotten Russian empire is collapsing”, 2014).

In foreign policy, Chornovil’s categorical rejection of renewed alliances with Russia and other post-Soviet republics represented a decisive normative stance. His insistence that Ukraine should ‘enter Europe’ (Presidential candidate televised debates., 1991) marked a sharp contrast to Kravchuk’s more pragmatic multi-vectorism. While Chornovil acknowledged the necessity of economic cooperation with Russia, his rhetoric emphasized equal footing and national sovereignty, prioritizing integration into European structures as both a geopolitical and civilizational imperative.

The divergent electoral support for Kravchuk (61,59%) and Chornovil (23,27%) in the 1991 presidential elections offers insight into the ideological contours of early post-independence Ukraine. The electorate’s preference for Kravchuk’s moderate, continuity-inflected rhetoric suggests that Ukrainian society – while overwhelmingly supportive of sovereignty (as confirmed by the 90,32% in favor during the 1991 independence referendum) – remained ambivalent about abrupt ruptures with the Russian sphere. Kravchuk’s more measured rhetoric arguably resonated with a broader electorate unprepared for radical rupture. This contrast illustrates the discursive fault lines of early Ukrainian politics, shaped by divergent responses to the Soviet legacy and divergent strategies for national reconstruction.

At the same time, empirical data on national self-identification illustrate an unambiguous positive dynamic in the development of the national identity of Ukrainians. The April 1991 survey conducted by the National Academy of Sciences showed that only 42% of respondents identified as Ukrainians, a figure that rose to 69% by 1992 (How has the identity of Ukrainians changed, 2023; Lukanska, 2021). This shift suggests a rapid reconfiguration of national consciousness catalyzed by institutional developments such as the referendum, the symbolism of independence, and the rhetorical framing advanced by political elites. The discursive emphasis on Ukrainians as ‘masters of their own land’ helped to legitimize new governance institutions and facilitated a broader sense of political belonging. The coalescence of external transformations (e.g., the Soviet collapse) with internal nation-building measures produced a fertile context for the emergence of a consolidated civic identity in the early 1990s.

Political rhetoric during the presidency of Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005).

Leonid Kuchma, like his predecessor Leonid Kravchuk, emerged from the Soviet political system, though his ascent was primarily catalysed by the political liberalization of perestroika. His tenure as a deputy in the Ukrainian SSR and later in the first convocation of the Verkhovna Rada (1990-1992) was marked by near-complete rhetorical abstention (Shurkhalo, 2024), a factor that contributed to his public image as a politically passive and administratively dependent figure. This perception, though later revealed to be misleading, likely facilitated his nomination to the post of Prime Minister by Kravchuk in 1992. His technocratic profile—non-partisan and ideologically non-committal – positioned him as a politically adaptive actor capable of navigating the fluid post-Soviet landscape.

Kuchma’s 1994 presidential campaign capitalized on a growing public disillusionment with Kravchuk’s economic stewardship amid an acute systemic crisis. His electoral rhetoric centered on the imperative of change and the promise of decisive economic reform, reflecting a deliberate pivot to pragmatic populism. He effectively mobilized the industrial electorate in eastern and southern Ukraine by advancing a platform of economic restoration through reinvigorated ties with Russia, the protection of

industrial interests, and the elevation of the Russian language to co-official status. This strategic positioning enabled him to construct a discursive identity as a results-oriented 'businessman with pro-Russian inclinations', in contrast to Kravchuk's portrayal as a traditional political figure unable to deliver rapid solutions.

Pre-election polling data confirm Kuchma's success in capturing the so-called 'protest electorate' – a demographic driven more by dissatisfaction with incumbent governance than by coherent ideological alignment (Ostapets, 2016). His victory thus marked not merely a leadership turnover, but the emergence of a deeper structural cleavage in Ukrainian political life.

The 1994 presidential election laid bare the regional polarization within Ukrainian society. The electoral geography revealed a bifurcation of the polity along both cultural-historical and geopolitical axes. Kuchma's support was concentrated in the eastern and southern regions, where post-Soviet industrial decline had heightened receptivity to promises of stability through renewed cooperation with Russia. In these areas, cultural affinity with the Russian language and lingering identification with the Soviet legacy reinforced electoral alignment. Conversely, Kravchuk found his electorate in the western and parts of the central regions, where political identity was more closely tied to the Ukrainian language, historical narratives of independence, and aspirations for European integration.

This specialised divergence reflected not only contrasting voter preferences but deeper historical trajectories. Western Ukraine, shaped by experiences of foreign domination and national revival, articulated a vision of the state rooted in cultural sovereignty and normative alignment with Europe. The East and South, by contrast, remained embedded in industrial infrastructures and symbolic imaginaries inherited from the Soviet project. The election thus functioned as a discursive arena in which two competing models of Ukraine's development – European and post-Soviet – were publicly and electorally staged.

More than a one-time political contest, the 1994 presidential race set a rhetorical precedent for subsequent political campaigns. The regional polarization it revealed would become a stable axis of political mobilization thereafter. This foundational moment institutionalized a pattern wherein electoral success hinged not solely on ideological coherence or policy platforms, but on the ability to articulate regionally resonant narratives of national identity, sovereignty, and geopolitical belonging.

Leonid Kuchma's presidency inaugurated a discursive shift from the symbolic rupture of the early 1990s to rhetoric of strategic continuity. Rather than engaging in normative delegitimation of the Soviet past, Kuchma deployed a controlled ambiguity that allowed him to dissociate the legitimacy of Ukrainian sovereignty from the need to renounce its Soviet institutional origins. This approach enabled a dual function: securing post-Soviet nationhood internally while managing geopolitical expectations externally.

A recurring motif in his rhetoric was the historicization – but not condemnation – of the Soviet Union. In his 1999 address to the Verkhovna Rada, Kuchma asserted that Ukraine would never return to the Soviet model but simultaneously insisted on preserving 'all pages' of its past (Kuchma, 1999). Such framing served to neutralize polarizing historical debates while validating the post-1991 polity as a pragmatic continuation rather than a radical break. His later statement – "there is no such thing as only black or only white in history" (Kuchma, 2004) – eliminated moral binaries from political discourse, enabling a depoliticized engagement with collective memory.

This rhetorical moderation was particularly salient in relation to the Holodomor. Kuchma avoided framing the famine within accusatory or juridical narratives; instead, his UN address in 2003 emphasized memorialization as a global preventative imperative (Kuchma admitted that he does not want to..., 2003). This allowed the national trauma to function as an instrument of international moral alignment without disrupting his policy of regional equilibrium.

Simultaneously, Kuchma's discourse on sovereignty was structurally defensive and

strategically elastic. Amidst growing Russian influence and persistent institutional fragility, he repeatedly affirmed the non-negotiable nature of Ukrainian independence. Yet this affirmation was embedded within a language of cooperative interdependence. The formula 'equal and mutually beneficial cooperation' reinterpreted asymmetric dependence as a chosen modality of international conduct, thereby mitigating perceptions of vulnerability (Signing of the "Treaty on Friendship..., 1997).

His pragmatism was particularly pronounced in the economic domain. While promoting diversification of external partnerships, Kuchma continued to articulate the necessity of sustained economic ties with Russia – particularly in energy and heavy industry – as structurally inevitable. This rhetorical realism not only acknowledged material constraints but actively mobilized support among electorates in Ukraine's East and South, where economic identities remained intertwined with the post-Soviet industrial complex.

Kuchma's multi-vector foreign policy discourse was not an ad hoc compromise but a carefully structured rhetorical technology. While his early presidency included engagement with the Eurasian space (Kuchma, 1994), he progressively reframed foreign alignment through a European lens. His 1995 Berlin speech defined integration into OSCE, NATO, the EU, and WEU as strategic imperatives (Vidnyanskyj, 2016: 15-17), initiating a discursive reorientation without immediate institutional rupture.

This reconfiguration culminated in a full rhetorical embrace of European identity by 2004. The formulae 'Europeanisation is our national idea' and 'Ukraine is not Russia' (Kuchma, 2004) recast geopolitical choice as a question of civilizational belonging. Citing sociological data to show that Euro-Atlanticism prevailed among the professional elite and youth, Kuchma linked geopolitical alignment with generational renewal and social modernization. This turn served to project European integration not merely as a strategic necessity, but as a teleological endpoint in Ukraine's identity trajectory.

Notably, even at the peak of his Europeanist rhetoric, Kuchma retained discursive space for cooperation with Russia, consistently describing the bilateral relationship in terms of 'partnership'. This parallelism was not a contradiction but an intentional synthesis. It allowed him to accommodate Ukraine's internal cultural heterogeneity and geopolitical dependencies while sustaining a coherent narrative of sovereign agency.

Kuchma's domestic rhetoric was oriented toward the symbolic production of national unity, a strategy that mirrored and supported his emphasis on state sovereignty. His 1999 address to the Verkhovna Rada stressed the shared responsibility of central and regional authorities to ensure the "unity and integrity of the state" (Kuchma, 1999), articulating unity not as a normative given, but as a task of political engineering. This rhetoric served as a stabilizing response to structural regional divisions, which were exacerbated by economic asymmetries and divergent historical legacies.

Rather than constructing unity through an assertive nationalist paradigm, Kuchma adopted a model of rhetorical containment – eschewing over identification with national-patriotic narratives that could alienate electorates in the East and South. The differential symbolic valence of OUN-UPA across regions made overt engagement with such movements politically costly. For Western Ukraine, they functioned as markers of anti-Soviet resistance and national revival; in the East and South, Soviet-era interpretations rendered them suspect or antagonistic. By avoiding emphasis on these polarizing historical symbols, Kuchma preserved rhetorical flexibility while limiting the potential for interregional confrontation.

Crimea represented a specific discursive challenge. Throughout his presidency, Kuchma consistently reaffirmed Ukraine's sovereignty over the peninsula, invoking the formula 'Crimea is an integral part of Ukraine' (Ukraine – President Kuchma on market reforms, 2015). This formula functioned less as a performative assertion of national sentiment than as a discursive mechanism for containing separatist tendencies and signaling the non-negotiability of territorial integrity. While lacking a transformative agenda for integration, this consistency contributed to the temporary neutralization of open contestation over Crimea during his tenure.

Kuchma's treatment of language policy illustrates the calculated ambivalence of his domestic discourse. In contrast to campaign promises of formal bilingualism, his later rhetoric emphasized the primacy of Ukrainian as the sole state language. "There is no oppression of the Russian language in Ukraine... Ukrainian is the state language" (Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma declared..., 2001), he stated in 1996, striking a balance between formal constitutionalism and cultural accommodation. This shift marked a repositioning of language from a mobilizing tool to a stabilizing one. While he refrained from granting Russian official status, he repeatedly acknowledged the importance of linguistic diversity, rhetorically signaling continuity with his earlier base in the Russophone regions.

These rhetorical recalibrations were integral to Kuchma's electoral strategy, which increasingly relied on the management of regional expectations through controlled symbolic differentiation. His 1994 campaign mobilized southeastern industrial voters by foregrounding Russian ties and pragmatic economic cooperation. By contrast, the 1999 campaign, staged against the backdrop of a challenge from Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko, recast Kuchma as a defender of a European and democratic Ukraine. This realignment allowed him to mobilize support in the West and Center by positioning his opponent as a proxy for Soviet authoritarianism and regression.

The repeated use of regional polarization as an electoral mechanism during both campaigns entrenched a divisions that would become a structural feature of Ukrainian politics. As A. Aslund notes, this strategic exploitation of geopolitical and ideological binaries became central to securing electoral support, often overriding coherent policy orientation (Aslund, 2002: 290-293).

Kuchma's ability to adapt his rhetoric to shifting political contexts was a key factor in his political resilience. However, this flexibility bordered on inconsistency, and his balancing between incompatible narratives – Ukrainian national identity, post-Soviet legacy, European integration, and Russian partnership – produced rhetorical dissonance. While designed to neutralize opposition and sustain broad appeal, this ambivalence contributed to public distrust and sharpened ideological fault lines.

The opposition landscape in Ukraine between 1994 and 2004 reveals a dual trajectory: ideological pluralism and fragmentation during 1994-1999, followed by consolidation and intensified contestation in 1999-2004 in response to growing authoritarian tendencies. Central to this process was the role of the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU), led by Petro Symonenko, whose rhetorical strategy combined nostalgic reaffirmation of Soviet legacies with selective adaptation to post-Soviet political conditions.

Symonenko's discourse consistently framed the Soviet past not as a liability but as a resource. In public addresses, he celebrated Soviet achievements in industry and social welfare, advocating for their reinterpretation rather than rejection: "The Soviet Union gave us the basis of industrial power and social justice. We should not abandon this heritage, but adapt it to modern realities" (Symonenko, 1998). This position positioned the CPU as the custodian of a 'functional memory' – linking sovereignty to stability, and social justice to integration with Russia. While often accused of pro-Russian bias, Symonenko rhetorically reaffirmed Ukraine's independence, but on terms rooted in socialist economics and historical continuity.

This model of sovereignty emphasized state viability through strategic alignment with Russia. In a 1999 interview, Symonenko argued for intensified bilateral cooperation as the only viable path to crisis recovery, asserting that "Ukraine must unequivocally get closer to Russia in economic cooperation and cultural exchange" (Here and now (1999)..., 2022). His economic proposals and cultural references constructed a geopolitical imaginary in which Russia remained both a normative reference point and a practical guarantor of stability. European integration, by contrast, was framed as ideologically incompatible and economically detrimental – a rhetorical inversion of Western-oriented modernization narratives.

Symonenko's rhetoric on NATO and the Holodomor further entrenched this

antagonism. His rejection of the Holodomor's classification as genocide – “a tragedy, but the result of socio-economic policy, not an attack on the Ukrainian people” – aligned with a class-based interpretation that positioned the famine within a broader socialist framework, displacing nationalist historiography (Symonenko, 1998). Likewise, his call for security alliances among ‘Slavic peoples’ sought to construct a cultural-political bloc that bypassed Western security architectures and reaffirmed post-Soviet solidarity.

Although Symonenko supported Ukrainian territorial integrity, including over Crimea, his rhetoric framed unity through the lens of shared Soviet identity. His advocacy for official bilingualism – “Russian is not a threat, but a means of overcoming artificially fuelled regional confrontation” (Here and now (1999)..., 2022) – underscored his strategy of discursive de-escalation. However, by tying national unity to Soviet heritage, the CPU's rhetoric alienated regions invested in post-imperial reorientation. The commemorative invocation of the October Revolution as a ‘holiday of unity’ epitomized a counter-hegemonic narrative in which identity was grounded not in rupture, but in restored continuity (Meeting of Ukrainian and Russian diplomats, 1995).

Electorally, this discourse proved effective. Between 1994 and 1999, the CPU garnered the highest levels of parliamentary support, peaking with 38% of the presidential vote in 1999. The party's resonance was strongest in central and eastern Ukraine, where Soviet-era social imaginaries remained salient. The CPU successfully mobilized these affective reserves, offering a rhetorical alternative to the disruptive effects of market reform, governance crises, and perceived Western imposition.

Yet this rhetorical success came at the cost of national integration. The CPU's discourse, although legitimate for a significant portion of voters, deepened symbolic fragmentation. In a context where Western and central regions oriented toward Ukrainianization and European alignment, the Communists reinforced a Soviet-affiliated identity in the East and South. This linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical bifurcation – reproduced and amplified through electoral discourse – eroded the possibility of a shared national project and institutionalized regional polarization.

The Socialist Party of Ukraine (SPU), under Oleksandr Moroz, represented a more adaptive strand of the left. Drawing on socialist traditions, the SPU articulated a program that merged social justice with national sovereignty and post-Soviet reformism. Unlike the CPU, the SPU acknowledged the need for structural transformation, and positioned itself against authoritarianism and corruption under Kuchma's administration. Its participation in ‘Ukraine without Kuchma’ and the Orange Revolution positioned the SPU as a transitional actor – bridging Soviet-era values with emerging democratic aspirations.

The SPU's rhetorical shift – from ideological orthodoxy to rights-based, anti-corruption populism – enabled limited convergence with national-democratic movements. This pragmatic recalibration, however, did not yield dominance; in parliamentary elections of 1994 and 1998, the SPU ranked third in popular support, reflecting both the durability of leftist appeals and the limits of their transformation.

By the early 2000s, the appeal of explicitly communist rhetoric began to decline, due to generational change, political pluralization, and the CPU's failure to innovate discursively. The party's opposition to the Orange Revolution and support for Viktor Yanukovich in 2004 marked its retreat into ideological retrenchment and its alienation from broader civic mobilization. While the CPU remained electorally relevant, it increasingly functioned as a rhetorical artifact of a fading paradigm – simultaneously symptomatic of unresolved post-Soviet identities and a barrier to national consolidation.

The national-democratic opposition in Ukraine underwent a discursive and organizational transformation between 1994 and 2004. Initially represented by the People's Movement of Ukraine (PMU) under Vyacheslav Chornovil, the opposition articulated a rigidly anti-communist and pro-European rhetoric, which framed Ukrainian sovereignty not merely as political autonomy, but as a civilizational rupture from Soviet and Russian influence. Chornovil's post-1994 rhetoric, while retaining the foundational nationalist narrative, reoriented its focus toward systemic critique of the ruling elite. His

denunciation of the 'corrupt communist nomenklatura' (Suspilne Media, 1995c) functioned as both a delegitimizing device and a marker of institutional continuity with the Soviet regime.

Chornovil's opposition to Kuchma's multi-vectorism was grounded in a discourse of exclusive Europeanism. His statement to Russian diplomats in 1995: "We would not want Ukraine to be seen as a different country, different from England, France and Germany" – rejected cultural relativism and embedded Ukraine within a teleological European trajectory (Vyacheslav Chornovil: Rally on European Square, 1995). This rhetorical absolutism reinforced identity boundaries between East and West and contributed to the semantic polarization of Ukrainian politics.

Following Chornovil's death in 1999, the PMU's electoral base and ideological framework were partially absorbed by new formations, most notably Viktor Yushchenko's 'Our Ukraine' bloc. Yushchenko's rhetoric inherited the Europeanist legacy but modified its register. As a technocratic figure, he recalibrated the national-democratic message to appeal to a broader constituency, including centrist voters, the business community, and moderate Russophones. Unlike the PMU's exclusivist discourse, 'Our Ukraine' deployed unifying language aimed at bridging regional divides, while sustaining a normative commitment to European integration, democratic consolidation, and anti-corruption reform.

Yulia Tymoshenko's political rhetoric introduced a populist and socially charged variation of opposition discourse. Emerging from the same post-Kuchma opposition front, the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc (YTB) articulated a critique of oligarchic governance not from an ideological-national standpoint, but from a moral-economic one. Her emphasis on social justice and public mobilization, combined with emotional appeals and strategic use of media, constructed an affective counter-hegemonic narrative. While her positioning was partially aligned with national-democratic forces, it was less anchored in identity politics and more oriented toward redistributive populism and regime delegitimation.

These rearticulations of opposition discourse signaled a broader shift: from ideological binary (nationalist vs. post-Soviet) to a more complex matrix that combined geopolitical orientation, generational identity, and class-based appeals. Political rhetoric during this period functioned as a principal mechanism of political socialization, particularly for youth formed in the context of post-1991 independence. The divergence in identity narratives – between those raised in the Soviet system and those formed within an independent Ukraine – translated into differentiated receptivity to political messages. While older cohorts responded to stability-oriented, pro-Russian discourses, younger generations increasingly identified with pro-European, reformist agendas.

This generational and regional cleavage was not merely a reflection of social attitudes, but a product of rhetorical construction. The discourses of political elites reinforced, amplified, and institutionalized these divides, shaping not only electoral outcomes but the very architecture of political belonging. Rhetoric thus played a constitutive role in Ukraine's political development – simultaneously fostering democratic pluralism and deepening societal segmentation.

By the early 2000s, the cumulative effect of these rhetorical strategies contributed to a reconfiguration of Ukraine's political field. National-democratic discourse ceased to be the property of a narrow western electorate and became the dominant language of reform-oriented opposition. At the same time, the semantic legacy of Chornovil – particularly his articulation of European identity as a moral imperative – continued to inform opposition rhetoric, even as its tone softened and its range broadened.

Conclusions. The period from 1991 to 2004 in Ukraine was defined by the discursive construction of a contested national identity, forged amid historical ambivalence, regional asymmetries, and geopolitical uncertainty. This study confirms the central hypothesis: political rhetoric during this formative decade did not merely reflect pre-existing divisions – it actively produced, structured, and legitimised competing visions of Ukrainian nationhood.

Presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, both embedded in the Soviet institutional legacy, employed divergent rhetorical strategies to manage Ukraine's post-imperial transition. Kravchuk's discourse affirmed independence while maintaining symbolic continuity, relying on notions of unity, legality, and cultural inclusiveness to stabilise the early post-Soviet state. In contrast, Kuchma institutionalised the rhetoric of strategic ambiguity: balancing Soviet nostalgia and economic reliance on Russia with growing appeals to European integration and democratic modernity. This flexibility enabled him to manage domestic fragmentation and legitimise a multi-vector foreign policy, while preserving the appearance of ideological coherence.

Oppositional rhetoric challenged this ambivalence by articulating alternative identity projects. Figures such as Vyacheslav Chornovil, Viktor Yushchenko, and Yulia Tymoshenko offered competing narratives grounded in civic nationalism, European orientation, and historical justice. Their discourses mobilised younger generations and regional communities in Western and Central Ukraine, particularly through the reframing of the Holodomor, advocacy for Ukrainian as the sole state language, and emphasis on democratic reform. These rhetorical strategies laid the semantic groundwork for subsequent pro-European mobilisations, including the Orange Revolution.

Meanwhile, leftist and pro-Soviet actors, especially the Communist Party of Ukraine, preserved a counter-narrative centred on Soviet achievements, Russian cultural affinity, and economic stability. This rhetoric, resonant in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, contributed to the entrenchment of identity cleavages that were not merely elective but existential – dividing visions of the state's historical legacy and geopolitical future.

Beyond the ideological poles, political rhetoric during this period became a primary vehicle of political socialisation. Public speeches, electoral campaigns, and media discourse created a symbolic arena in which sovereignty, democracy, and cultural belonging were contested and codified. A new rhetorical vocabulary – featuring terms such as 'European choice', 'sobornist', 'historical justice', and 'independent development' – restructured public understanding of the nation. Importantly, this discourse also marked a generational shift, with youth increasingly aligning with reformist and Europeanist values, in contrast to older cohorts anchored in Soviet cultural memory.

Ultimately, the decade did not produce a unified national identity. Instead, it exposed the plural and dynamic character of identity formation in Ukraine, structured by regional differentiation. Yet, the cumulative effect of political rhetoric was not neutral. It contributed to the institutionalisation of key themes – sovereignty, democracy, memory, and Europeanism – that would shape Ukraine's political trajectory in the years to follow.

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