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Is the Russia-Ukraine Conflict a Clash of Civilizations?

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Abstract

The ongoing confrontation between Russia and Ukraine serves as a compelling example of the complex interplay between geopolitics, cultural identities, and historical legacies in intricate international disputes. This article employs Samuel P. Huntington's concept of the "Clash of Civilizations" to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted aspects of this enduring conflict. As historical precedents show, the conflict is a manifestation of protracted and ongoing acts of aggression. It highlights the significance of cultural and civilizational differences in shaping its trajectory. Given the evolving global dynamics of conflicts, it is increasingly important to understand various other factors which exploit these differences and led to the deepening of the conflict. The aim of this research is to examine the underlying factors that have contributed to the Russia – Ukraine war, with a particular emphasis on cultural and theological differences between the two countries, as well as the impact of global power dynamics. The ongoing conflict between the two adversaries could be viewed as a manifestation of longstanding historical tensions rather than a single isolated event.

Keywords: Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Clash of Civilizations, Geopolitics, Ethnic divisions, Religious Clashes

Introduction

The interdependence of geopolitics, cultural identities, and historical legacies often serves as a recurring catalyst for complex international

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conflicts. The ongoing confrontation between Russia and Ukraine serves as a compelling illustration of these underlying dynamics. The protracted and enduring conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine has significantly impacted their bilateral relationship, resulting in extensive geopolitical consequences. The issue at hand is predominantly attributed to the intersection of historical animosities, divergent cultural norms, and conflicting geopolitical agendas.¹

This study aims to analyze the underlying elements contributing to the Russian-Ukrainian war, with a specific emphasis on cultural and theological disparities between the two nations, as well as the influence of global power dynamics. The main contention comprises two components.

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine can be interpreted as a manifestation of deep-rooted historical tensions, rather than being attributed to a single isolated incident. The present crisis surpasses the boundaries of traditional diplomatic discourse due to its foundation in a multifaceted network of historical engagements, territorial contentions, and identity clashes.² In light of global observations on the fluctuating nature of tensions, indicative of the fact that there is a growing imperative to grasp the cultural and civilizational foundations that contribute to the conflict.

During the initiation of protests, it can be observed that ethnic identity emerged as the predominant social division, influenced by perceptions of Ukraine's foreign policy alignment regarding key actors in the field of international relations, namely the European Union and Russia.³ The domestic divisions between Russia and the United States, along with its European allies (referred to as the West), reached a culmination as a result of geopolitical competition. A substantial portion of the prevailing analysis has effectively underscored the importance of Russia's activities in instigating the conflict. There are many experts and scholars who draw

¹ B. Barkanov. "Crisis in Ukraine: Clash of Civilizations or Geopolitics?" in Roger Kanet and Matthew Sussex (eds). *Power, Politics and Confrontation in Eurasia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

² Constantine Pleshakov. *The Crimean Nexus: Putin's War and the Clash of Civilizations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

³ P. Scuticchio. "A Clash of Civilizations in Ukraine? Not Quite," *International Affairs Review* (2014). <http://www.iar-gwu.org/content/clashcivilizations-ukraine-not-quite>.

study through a theoretical perspective developed by Samuel P. Huntington, the “Clash of Civilizations”, to analyze the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Huntington believes that the post-cold war era would be characterized by the clash of all types of civilizations instead of ideology or states. Such fault lines reside at the civilizational level and are the main reasons behind the existing conflicts in modern times. The proposed study will examine the Russia-Ukraine war using the prism of this particular theory, specifying the importance of the presence of deep-rooted cultural and civilization differences on the evolution of the conflict. This research identifies the underlying factors that led to the rise of conflict between Russia and Ukraine, thus making it a key issue at the international level. A deeper understanding of this multidimensional problem can be achieved through an in-depth study of the cultural, historical, and geopolitical aspects.

Besides, this discussion will be a helpful addition to broader debates about the appropriateness of the Clash of Civilizations hypothesis in explaining existing conflicts and their influence on the formation of diplomatic strategies and efforts in conflict resolution. The discussion that follows is divided into two parts. The first part will provide a brief introduction to the argument by Huntington in his book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, and it will be explained using secondary data, literature sources, and media reports. The end of the analysis looks at the most recent developments and gives a cursory speculation of the way that the conflict is likely to go in the future. Furthermore, this work aims to demonstrate the continued relevance and applicability of Huntington's theory in the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order

In his work titled “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,” Huntington expounds upon the concept of a clash between civilizations and its implications for the restructuring of the global order. In the decades following the conclusion of the cold war, cultural disparities are expected to hold greater significance compared to ideological, fundamentalist, or economic disparities.⁴ The dominance of world politics would be characterized by the clash of civilizations, with future geopolitical

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

divisions aligning along fault lines separating different civilizations. Based on his conviction regarding the eventual reversion of nations to their historical and cultural origins, he anticipated the emergence of the Ukrainian predicament and the subsequent escalation of a major power struggle among the fractured states. Ukraine exhibits divisions based on topographical, historical, theological, and cultural factors. Whereas western Ukraine demonstrates a proclivity towards Europe, eastern Ukraine and Crimea exhibit a leaning towards Orthodox Russia.

According to Huntington, there is a possibility that Ukraine may experience fragmentation along its fault lines, resulting in the formation of two separate units.⁵ Several civilizational blocs would emerge in the post-cold war era, with China, Russia, and the United States serving as the majority of these "core nations." The aforementioned fundamental states play a crucial role in effectively tackling the challenges that are likely to emerge in nations experiencing internal divisions, such as Ukraine. The United States' stance towards Ukraine is fundamentally at odds with the recommendations that Huntington would have put forward. The events in question can be characterized as a campaign in support of the republic, which ultimately led to a coup in Kyiv with backing from the United States.

Following the occurrence of these crises, the Donetsk and Luhansk areas in eastern Ukraine witnessed the declaration of independence by Russian separatists from the Ukrainian government. In recent years, Ukraine has seen a notable demographic, political, and economic transition.⁶ The demographic composition of Eastern Ukraine exhibits a notable influence from Russia and the ideology of communism, while Western and Central Ukraine demonstrate a discernible influence from Western nations and the principles of capitalism. The Ukrainian culture underwent a transition towards adopting a Western-style system of governance. The demographic composition of eastern Ukraine is subject to the influence of the Russian Orthodox regime, whereas the population of western Ukraine expresses a preference for a democratic system aligned with Western values.⁷ Within

⁵ S. White, S. Oates, and B. Miller. "The 'Clash of Civilizations' and Postcommunist Europe," *Comparative European Politics* 1 (2003): 111–127.

⁶ Ross Douthat. "Yes, There Is a Clash of Civilizations," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/30/opinion/ukraine-clash-of-civilizations.html>

⁷ P. Ukielski. "The Clash of Civilizations in Ukraine," *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 21, no. 1 (2023): 41–58.

the political framework of Ukraine, the parliamentary body, under the leadership of the prime minister, exhibits a pro-European inclination, while the president's stance was influenced by Russia until the year 2014.

According to Bruno Macaes, the global landscape can be conceptualized as being comprised of distinct entities referred to as "civilization states." The concept of great powers, characterized by a shared cultural background, aspiring to establish themselves as self-contained entities, potentially encompassing their nuclear defense systems, rather than pursuing global dominance, is noteworthy. In the specific context, the invasion of Ukraine could be viewed as an attempt to project hegemony over the Russian world. According to Vladimir Putin's articulation in his speech on warfare, the objective is to achieve a form of civilizational self-containment, characterized by the integration of history, culture, and a shared spiritual space.⁸

The emergence of the language of civilization in Russia may be traced back to the period after Putin's rise to power. There is a prevailing belief that Russia possesses civilizational values that are both universal and distinct from those found in other parts of the world. The concept of Russianness has acquired an emotional dimension with the formation of the Russian world, encompassing Russians residing beyond the borders of Russia and individuals who identify with a sense of Russianness.⁹ According to Huntington, Russia's activities might be seen as relevant to the war of cultures or clash of civilizations with Western civilization, as Russia perceives itself as susceptible to Western normative and cultural systems. Putin's speech on Ukraine's annexation was widely covered in western media as 'anti-West' on his remark calling "racist" to European leaders for being portraying Russia as a dangerous country.¹⁰

A classic instance of civilizational conflict arises when a dominant imperial power endeavors to assert or reclaim authority over populations residing

⁸ Ross Douthat. "Vladimir Putin's Clash of Civilizations," *The New York Times*, February 26, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/26/opinion/vladimir-putin-clash-of-civilizations.html>

⁹ Davide Orsi. "The 'Clash of Civilizations' 25 Years On: A Multidisciplinary Appraisal" (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2018).

¹⁰ Visit at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-denounces-imperialism-while-annexing-large-swathes-of-ukraine/>.

on its peripheries, who instead align themselves with other civilizational hubs. Although European civilization has had some influence on Russia, Mongol principles rather than European ones are the foundation of its administrative system. Ukraine's contemporary orientation toward Europe reflects deeper historical linkages to the western regions of the former Rus', which maintained closer cultural and political ties with Europe. In contrast, the rise of Muscovy in the northeast occurred under the prolonged influence of Mongol rule, which shaped its administrative practices and contributed to the development of centralized autocracy. Scholars have long debated Russia's identity as straddling both European and Eurasian civilizational spheres, highlighting the enduring tension between Western and Eastern influences in its historical evolution.¹¹ Historically, the 16th and 17th centuries witnessed two endeavors by Muscovy to subjugate Belarus, which can be characterized as borderland civilizational warfare. Due to the tenacious opposition from the indigenous "Litvin" population, these campaigns were, however, characterized by distinct acrimony. Consequently, the conquerors employed genocidal tactics as a means to uphold their dominion.¹²

Civilizations and Conflict: Post-Cold War Geopolitical Landscape

During the 1990s, two prominent views of the global landscape following the conclusion of the cold war gained significant traction. Francis Fukuyama's initial proposition, commonly known as the "end of history" thesis, posited that liberal democracy emerged victorious after a longstanding struggle among diverse comprehensive philosophies. Henceforth, liberalism would emerge as the sole viable choice. The second theory, proposed by Samuel Huntington and commonly referred to as the "clash of civilizations," posited a future scenario in which the global landscape would undergo fragmentation, characterized by the emergence of competing and adversarial civilizational blocs. There have been suggestions positing that the invasion of Ukraine by Russia has initiated a reset in history, hence challenging the accuracy of Fukuyama's thesis.¹³ However, what is the perspective on Huntington? Does the united front of

¹¹ Donald Ostrowski. *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304–1589* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹² Timothy Snyder. *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹³ Ross Douthat. "Yes, There Is a Clash of Civilizations," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/30/opinion/ukraine-clash-of-civilizations.html>.

Western nations against Russian aggression serve as proof of the thesis? In an essay published in *The New York Times*, Ross Douthat argues in favor of the aforementioned proposition, but with several qualifications.

Douthat presents his argument for the prescience of Huntington by drawing upon the dissolution of the unipolar global order dominated by the United States in the aftermath of the cold war, and the subsequent emergence of a multipolar world wherein “the broad divergences among the principal global powers have, to a large extent, adhered to the civilizational frameworks outlined by Huntington.” Douthat claims that this statement is very helpful in supporting the thesis made by Huntington. Yglesias, in his turn, takes a more holistic stance on the analysis of the modern world conflicts and finds strong evidence proving Huntington's arguments wrong. Russia may be defined as a multicultural empire with a variety of cultures.¹⁴ The most common religious affiliation is Eastern Orthodox, with approximately 41% of the population following it. In contrast, Ukraine is predominantly Orthodox, with a notable presence of Eastern Rite Catholics, primarily concentrated in the western region, comprising approximately 30% of the population. This statement appears to conflate the Huntington-emphasized civilizational divisions.

In contrast, Yglesias espouses a perspective akin to Fukuyama's, as he traces the roots of the conflict to Ukraine's aspiration to associate itself with the European Union in pursuit of economic progress, in contrast to Russia, which is comparatively less economically vibrant. Taking a broader perspective on global affairs, Yglesias discerns a multitude of conflicts within civilizations and strategic maneuvers on the geopolitical stage that seem to be driven by the conventional dynamics of Great Power politics. These dynamics involve smaller and less powerful states seeking protection by forming alliances with stronger states.¹⁵ This argument is more persuasive than a forecast that mostly anticipates conflicts based on civilizational differences. Huntington's prediction regarding the resurgence

¹⁴ Damon Linker. “Is the Russia-Ukraine War a ‘Clash of Civilizations’?” *The Week*, March 30, 2022, <https://theweek.com/world/1011957/is-the-russia-ukraine-war-a-clash-of-civilizations>.

¹⁵ O. Radchenko *et al.*, “Mental and Value Features of Ukrainian Society in the Context of ‘Civilizations Clash’ as the Main Object of Information War in Ukraine,” in *National Security Drivers of Ukraine: Information Technology, Strategic Communication, and Legitimacy* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), 301–316.

of geopolitical conflict in the future is indeed valid. Nevertheless, the fault lines mostly stem from the global shift towards a multipolar state resembling the pre-1945 era, characterized by the presence of rival great powers, spheres of influence, defense alliances, and foreign policies driven by a combination of self-interest and the pursuit of national prestige.

Huntington Wisdom: Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution

The propensity to overlook deep-rooted historical and cultural divisions in favor of a limited emphasis on military strategy and tactics is sometimes reinforced by the brutality and sorrow inherent in warfare. However, a comprehensive understanding of the conflict necessitates an awareness of its contextual factors. The efficacy of diplomacy is enhanced by a comprehensive comprehension of the intricate historical factors that contribute to the emergence of conflicts.¹⁶

Some scholars explore various instances where American leaders faced challenges and failed in managing certain challenges at the climax of the cold war.¹⁷ The US policy towards China could be defined as constructive engagement, with a presumption of the leader of a distinct civilization that had different interests would show a true desire to be westernized. The Chinese are to be in accordance with the claims as put forward by Huntington.¹⁸ According to the assertions made by him, it is posited that the Chinese hold the belief that their economic achievements may be predominantly attributed to the cultural and social superiority of Asian culture, in contrast to the culturally and socially deteriorating Western societies. The United States held the belief that following the liberation of Iraqis from a dictatorial regime, they would unite in support of democratic principles, overlooking long-standing ethnic and religious divisions, and swiftly embrace Western ideals, ideas, and viewpoints.

These errors collectively exhibit commonality in neglecting Samuel Huntington's assessment that the global landscape following the cold war

¹⁶ W. S. Smith. "Ukraine and the Clash of Civilizations," *The National Interest*, March 12, 2020. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/ukraine-and-clash-civilizations-153636>.

¹⁷ G. G. Lewicki. "Civilizational Security: Why the Russian Invasion of Ukraine Shows that 'National Security' Is Not Enough to Understand Geopolitics," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 89 (2023): 11.

¹⁸ Damon Linker, "Is the Russia-Ukraine War a 'Clash of Civilizations'?" *The Week*, March 30, 2022, <https://theweek.com/world/1011957/is-the-russia-ukraine-war-a-clash-of-civilizations>.

was undergoing a restructuring process based on ethnic, religious, and civilizational divisions. Nations opted to abandon artificial alliances formed during the cold war era and instead reorganized themselves based on shared historical relationships and according new economic dynamics. The ability to anticipate Turkey's inclination towards the Islamic world and its divergence from NATO's objectives, the challenges posed by Orthodox Greece as a member of the EU, and the aspirations of Chechnya and other Soviet regions for independence are some examples.¹⁹ According to Huntington (1993), in the era following the old War, the primary differentiating factors among nations remain no longer centered around ideology, politics, or economics only, but the cultural aspect became additionally viable in international relations.

The United States' approach to Russia has encountered significant obstacles due to its limited capacity to fully grasp the primary factors driving the motivations of various factions. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama posited that post-cold war Russia was undergoing a transition towards a political framework characterized by the genuine empowerment of the populace, hierarchical accountability of higher political entities to lower ones (rather than the reverse), and the prevalence of the rule of law over capricious law enforcement practices. This envisioned system would also entail the separation of powers and the establishment of an autonomous judiciary. The notion of Russia reverting to its authoritarian and Orthodox roots was deemed implausible by a significant number of individuals from Western societies.²⁰

Huntington accurately forecast the occurrence of the Ukraine problem. The theorist posited that states would inevitably go back to their historical and cultural origins. This led to the conclusion that the countries possessing different shades of civilizations, have potential to find themselves in conflicts with the other world powers. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, it is interesting to note that the United States, Germany, Russia, and powerful Islamic states joined forces to offer support to various proxy groups engaged in the conflict, according to their common linkages and

¹⁹ R. Taras. "Exhuming Samuel Huntington's Theorems: Civilizational Clashes, World Order, and the Impact on Europe," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 15, no. 2 (2023): 3–17.

²⁰ B. Barkanov. "Crisis in Ukraine: Clash of Civilizations or Geopolitics?" (2015).

interests.²¹ Huntington described Ukraine as a country that has divisions, which could be explained by the historical, geographical, and theological considerations. The western part of Ukraine is completely oriented on European values, and the eastern part and the Crimean peninsula are strongly oriented within the frames of the influence of Orthodox Russia.²² There exists a prevalent misinterpretation among casual readers of Huntington's work, wherein the significance of the term "clash" in the book's title is excessively magnified.

According to the assertion, Huntington purportedly urged Western civilization to actively participate in conflicts with other civilizations as a means of safeguarding its interests. Several scholars have mistakenly equated Huntington's concept of a "clash" with Bernard Lewis' hypothesis that radical Islam would instigate a worldwide confrontation between the Islamic world and the Western nations. Huntington's stance on the matter was one of prudence and diplomacy, as he strongly advised against provoking the Islamic world and emphasized the importance of exercising restraint in dealing with fragmented nations like Ukraine.²³ He strongly opposed the promotion of democracy as a major principle of the United States' foreign policy. The foremost duty of Western leaders is not to mold other civilizations to mirror the Western paradigm, a task that exceeds their waning influence, but rather to safeguard, defend, and revitalize the unique attributes of Western civilization.

Huntington viewed, the post-cold war era would witness the emergence of core nations as natural leaders within various civilizational blocs. China is considered to be at the forefront of the Sinic civilization, whereas Russia is seen as the leading force in the Orthodox civilization. Similarly, the United States is primarily under influenced of Western civilization.²⁴ The lack of a

²¹ H. Alhussainy. "Clash of Civilizations, Orientalism, and the 'Civilized' and 'Uncivilized,'" *Crossings: An Undergraduate Arts Journal* 3, no. 2 (2023); also "Paramilitaries in the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: Effects on the peace process," (Monograph, 2014), available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA614255.pdf>.

²² "Russia's War on Ukraine: Background," *European Parliament Research Service*, July 4, 2022. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/TD_Russia_war_Ukraine.pdf.

²³ O. Pavlova *et al.*, "The War between Ukraine and Russia Is a Historical and Civilizational Aspect," *TRAMES: A Journal of the Humanities & Social Sciences* 27, no. 4 (2023).

²⁴ N. U. Khanaliev. "The Religious Factor in the Clash of Civilizations from the Point of View of the State-Administrative Aspect," *RUDN Journal of Public Administration* 10, no. 3 (2023): 385–403.

prominent figure in the Islamic realm gives rise to a power struggle for leadership among the Sunni and Shia factions, however, there are some influential nations exist in the Middle East – Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The inclusion of these center states gaining utmost importance in day to day changing international and regional scenario.

Many assumed that the American policy towards Ukraine has been the exact opposite of the suggestions made by Huntington. This event was accompanied by a refusal to acknowledge any valid Russian interests in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, despite the profound historical connections between these regions. Additionally, the United States sponsored an ambiguous proxy struggle in eastern Ukraine. In light of the ongoing epidemic and its consequences, it is anticipated that the American populace will exhibit reduced tolerance towards an intrusive and universalistic foreign policy pursued by the United States in regions that hold minimal relevance to its national interests.²⁵ The proposed approach entails adopting the Huntington paradigm, which involves acknowledging the valid interests of other civilizational zones. This should be complemented by the utilization of genuine US diplomacy as the major tool for American foreign policy.

Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Is it a Turning Point in History?

The current efforts undertaken by Putin are in line with his prior activities in Georgia and, to a lesser degree, Armenia. Ukraine has at times been denied recognition as a fully distinct nation in certain political narratives. However, the question of what constitutes a “bona fide” nation remains contested in scholarly literature. Nations are not natural phenomena but socially constructed communities, shaped by shared history, culture, and collective identity. While diplomatic recognition plays a crucial role in legitimizing states within the international system, the existence of a nation is not solely contingent upon external validation but also on internal cohesion and self-identification. Nevertheless, what is striking is the sheer severity of the onslaught. The initiation of a confrontation by Putin can be deemed irrational, given the extent of his harsh actions, leaving no alternative but to engage in opposition. However, his failure lies in his inability to

²⁵ J. Magalhães. “The Clash in and for Ukraine | O Conflito na e pela Ucrânia,” *Revista Portuguesa de Ciência Política* 19 (2023): 69–81.

acknowledge the distinctiveness of this particular moment.²⁶ Vladimir Putin exhibits characteristics of a strategist from the nineteenth century and also embodies elements of Soviet ideology. The individual in question possesses a territorial perspective on power, as well as a culturalist perspective on the Russian Empire, with a particular focus on its Slavic and Orthodox elements.

Putin has demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding the presence of Ukrainian patriotism and the seemingly contradictory reinforcement of the Soviet system, which was established on the federation of socialist republics. The phenomenon described has given rise to nationalist movements with a 'republican' orientation in Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia. Furthermore, in Central Asia, it has also engendered the emergence of nationalist sentiments with a 'republican' character. The individual's preoccupation lies in aspiring to assume the role of the modern-day "Peter the Great" and be remembered in historical records as the individual responsible for the restoration of the Russian Empire.²⁷ However, it is irrational to engage in a battle that originated in the 19th century within the context of the 21st century.

Modern Ukraine and Clashing Civilizations

Huntington's insights exhibit a notable degree of value when applied to the analysis of the ongoing Ukrainian situation. Initially, the ones who referred to the theories of Huntington were proponents of Kyiv who preferred a clear break with Russia. Their logic was simple: Russia and Ukraine were distinct entities in the aspect of civilization, whereby Russia was the center of the Russian Orthodox civilization, and Ukraine had always tended towards Western civilization. Consequently, they claimed that the desire by Kyiv to be linked to Europe was a natural process. The above-mentioned position might appear to be rather rational, yet its representatives are distorting the points made by Huntington or deliberately distorting the facts.²⁸ The matter in question refers to the civilization gap, which is not

²⁶ R. Barzilai. "How Testosterone and Serotonin Drive the Shift in Global Power Dynamics, and Geopolitics of Social Conflict in the Clash of Civilizations," *Journal of NeuroPhilosophy* 2, no. 1 (2023).

²⁷ Olivier Roy. "Ukraine and the Clash of Civilizations Theory," European University Institute – Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, March 10, 2022.

²⁸ P. Romanov. "Clashing Civilizations in Modern Ukraine," *The Moscow Times*, August 31, 2014. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/08/31/clashing-civilizations-in-modern-ukraine-a38897>.

necessarily placed between Ukraine and Russia, but inside Ukrainian processes.

It is imperative to note that modern Ukraine is the product of Soviet history. Notably, during the Soviet era, the delineation of borders was undertaken by authorities without due consideration for indigenous customs, dialects, religious practices, or psychological dispositions, hence deviating from the tenets espoused by Huntington. If the Soviet leadership expressed a willingness to incorporate the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, which were previously under Russian control, they proceeded to do so. If the previous Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had intended to transfer Crimea from Russia to Ukraine, he could have accomplished this with a simple administrative action. The territorial expansion of the Soviet Union following World War II encompassed the westernmost region of Ukraine as part of its acquired territories.²⁹ Throughout history, the region has exhibited a strong inclination toward the Western direction. The formation of contemporary Ukraine can be attributed to the intricate amalgamation of diverse cultures. Ukraine is geographically divided into two distinct regions, namely Donetsk in the eastern part and Lviv in the western part.

The current contentious nature of the conflict in Ukraine can be attributed to various historical events. The slogan "the unity of Ukraine" and former president Petro Poroshenko's announcement that Ukrainian is the sole official language in the nation mostly align with the immediate objectives of Kyiv and the Western powers, rather than fully considering the historical and cultural complexities within the country. Crimea, which was previously under Russian control, has already transitioned to become a part of Russia. In contrast, the southern and eastern areas of Ukraine have been integrated into the country for a longer duration compared to Crimea, and exhibit a lesser degree of homogeneity due to their partial assimilation of Ukrainian culture.³⁰

The unsuccessful endeavors made by autocratic, Orthodox Russia to integrate the Catholic region of Poland that came under its control as a

²⁹ J. J. Villasmil-Espinoza, Y. Leheza, and L. Holovii. "Reflections for the Interdisciplinary Study of the Russian Federation's Invasion of Ukraine in 2022," (2022). <https://produccioncientificcaluz.org/index.php/cuestiones/article/view/38383/42552>.

³⁰ L. Fekete. "Civilizational Racism, Ethno-Nationalism, and the Clash of Imperialisms in Ukraine," *Race and Class* 64, no. 4 (2023).

result of the partitioning of Poland during the reign of Catherine the Great. Similarly, the Soviet Union's attempt to impose Sovietization and Russification upon the Baltic states proved to be fruitless. In both cases, the extraterrestrial culture did not establish itself definitively.³¹ In the alternative scenario, it is posited that Kyiv and Western powers may opt to disengage from the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, either due to a change in their perspective or because of their inability to suppress the local opposition. The aforementioned scenario would give rise to the establishment of a novel geographic entity, characterized by contested territorial boundaries and a governance system that lacks international recognition, with an undetermined duration of existence. However, it would provide a more accurate representation of the true state of civilization in that particular place. The third option entails the parties involved, who are fatigued by the consequences of war, including the loss of human lives and property, convening at the negotiating table to collectively determine their future through the process of mutual compromise.³² The proposed course of action is provisional, although it would effectively bring an end to the ongoing violence.

The views proposed by Huntington have seen limited acceptance among Western politicians, including Vladimir Putin. The decision of precedence between the principles of "territorial integrity" and "the right of peoples to self-determination" remains unresolved within the framework of contemporary international law.³³ The UN Charter maintains both of these principles in response to the widespread existence of double standards in modern politics. In his literary work, Huntington analyzed extensive historical data spanning several centuries, if not millennia. The United States during the presidency of Barack Obama, Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Germany under Chancellor Angela Merkel, and the deteriorating United Nations are expected to have diminished significance

³¹ N. Oktaviano and A. Burhanuddin. "Behind Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: The Clash of Different Modes of Capitalism," *Global: Jurnal Politik Internasional* 25, no. 2 (2023): 54–94.

³² P. Romanov. "Clashing Civilizations in Modern Ukraine," *The Moscow Times*, August 31, 2014. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/08/31/clashing-civilizations-in-modern-ukraine-a38897>.

³³ B. Doboš. "The Tale of Two Empires: Ukraine between the West and Russia," *Journal of Regional Security* 18, no. 1 (2023): 77–96.

in future historical accounts.³⁴ However, it is anticipated that conflicts of a civilizational kind will continue to endure. In the distant future, approximately one or two centuries hence, the contemporary situation in Ukraine is likely to fade from collective memory, potentially leading to confusion among students who may erroneously conflate it with historical conflicts of antiquity such as the Punic Wars and the Boer War.

While concluding the debate pointed the fact that the Russia–Ukraine conflict represents a multilayered case study in which geopolitical rivalry intersects with contested histories, competing national narratives, and evolving international norms. While the “Clash of Civilizations” framework advanced by Samuel P. Huntington provides a useful macro-level lens for interpreting identity-based tensions, its explanatory power remains limited when applied to the internal complexity of post-Soviet political transformations.

A key limitation of civilizational theory is its tendency to treat identities as fixed and externally bounded, whereas the Russia–Ukraine conflict demonstrates that identities are continuously constructed, reinterpreted, and strategically mobilized. In this regard, the work of Benedict Anderson is particularly relevant, as it conceptualizes nations as “imagined communities” formed through shared narratives rather than civilizational essences. Similarly, Anthony D. Smith highlights the role of ethno-symbolism, suggesting that historical memory and cultural myths are actively used in nation-building processes, especially in contested borderland regions such as Ukraine.

From this perspective, the Russia–Ukraine conflict can be interpreted less as a straightforward “civilizational clash” and more as a struggle over narrative sovereignty, that is, the authority to define historical continuity, cultural belonging, and political legitimacy. Competing interpretations of shared Rus’ heritage, Soviet history, and post-cold war statehood have produced overlapping but incompatible national projects, each claiming historical authenticity.

At the same time, the conflict cannot be fully understood without reference to the institutional framework of international politics. The principles of

³⁴ I. Yilmaz and N. Morieson. “Civilizationalism, Religions, and Populism,” in *Religions and the Global Rise of Civilizational Populism* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 25–44.

sovereignty, territorial integrity, and diplomatic recognition embedded in the system of the United Nations shape how legitimacy is conferred and contested. However, the gap between legal recognition and contested identity on the ground reveals a persistent tension in international relations; statehood is legally binary but socially contested.

Moreover, the escalation of the conflict demonstrates how historical narratives are not merely descriptive but performative – they actively shape policy decisions, justify territorial claims, and mobilize domestic legitimacy. This underscores the interaction between discourse and material power, where identity narratives become strategic instruments in geopolitical competition rather than passive reflections of cultural difference.

Therefore, while Huntington's thesis captures the visibility of cultural rhetoric in global conflicts, it underestimates the extent to which civilizational language is itself politically constructed and selectively deployed. The Russia - Ukraine war is not simply a confrontation between fixed civilizations but a dynamic struggle in which history, identity, and international law are simultaneously invoked and contested.

In conclusion, a more robust understanding of this conflict requires moving beyond monocausal civilizational explanations toward an integrated analytical framework that combines intellectual history, nationalism studies, and international legal theory. Such an approach reveals that contemporary conflicts are not merely clashes between civilizations, but contests over meaning, legitimacy, and the authority to define political reality itself.