STEFAN BATORY FOUNDATION

Poland and Ukraine: Overcoming the Past, Winning the Future

Edwin Bendyk

Volodymyr Zelensky's decision to name the Special Operations Centre "North" after the Heroes of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) triggered a predictable reaction in Poland. The outrage among politicians and commentators comes as no surprise, nor does the hysterical tone of many responses – including calls to strip the Ukrainian president of the Order of the White Eagle. The ghost of history has once again overshadowed Polish-Ukrainian relations, a reminder that an unconquered past can undermine a shared future at the least opportune moments.

Warming

Relations between the two countries seemed to be improving significantly in recent months. The excesses of Poland's presidential election campaign faded into history. After a protracted diplomatic dance over who should visit whom first, President Zelensky came to Warsaw in the autumn of 2025, and the Ukrainian side assessed his conversation with Karol Nawrocki positively. Not even the Polish president's pointed insistence that Ukraine show greater gratitude for Poland's commitment to wartime assistance caused lasting damage.

The factors that contributed to this improvement included progress on search and exhumation work in Ukraine, as well as preparations for the Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC). This year's edition of the international gathering will take place in late June in Gdańsk. April witnessed a curtain-raiser – a security conference in Rzeszów, opened jointly by Prime Ministers Donald Tusk and Yulia Svyrydenko. In May, Finance and Economy Minister Andrzej Domański led a business mission to Kyiv. Also in May, the Polish-Ukrainian Historical Congress was held in Baranów Sandomierski, a gathering that

delivered no breakthroughs, but demonstrated that academia can create space for dialogue on even the most difficult questions.

There is no shortage of other initiatives showing that Poles and Ukrainians have much to discuss. In mid-May, the XIX Poland-Ukraine Forum was held in Kyiv, organised by the Stefan Batory Foundation and the Kyiv-based International Renaissance Foundation. Representatives of leading Polish and Ukrainian civil society organisations gathered in the Ukrainian capital – organisations whose day-to-day work involves supporting people with migration and refugee experience, veterans, children and residents of frontline regions.

For many Polish participants, this was their first visit to Kyiv since the full-scale invasion began. Conversations centred on cooperation in the present, as well as joint initiatives for the post-war period and, inevitably, on an exchange of experience, particularly concerning how to build systems of resilience capable of weathering a prolonged and profound crisis. Ukrainians and Ukrainian civil society have demonstrated a remarkable ability to organise social resources and, in the most demanding of circumstances, have become a keystone of resistance against a war of aggression that has now lasted thirteen years. They are ready and willing to share their skills and experience, yet the greater obstacle often turns out to be a lack of interest or capacity among organisations outside Ukraine to take advantage of what they have to offer.

The return of history

History, however, has also returned to the stage – ushered in by politics. Volodymyr Zelensky took a decision that could not have gone unnoticed in Poland, let alone fail to provoke outrage. The Ukrainian president should have known as much. How, then, are we to interpret his choice? Even Ukrainian commentators have very limited insight into the mechanisms of decision-making at the highest levels of Ukrainian government. It is clear that Zelensky himself knows little about Poland and has a weak grasp of the nuances of Polish politics, and that there is no one in his immediate circle with significant experience in Polish affairs.

Within the government, there are politicians who know Poland well – most notably Deputy Prime Minister Taras Kachka, responsible for European and Atlantic integration, who speaks excellent Polish. But Kachka does not directly shape presidential decisions. The same is true of Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, who is also well-versed in Polish affairs but has limited influence over decisions taken by the president, particularly those made domestically.

In all likelihood, Zelensky gave no thought to the international context, concentrating instead on the domestic Ukrainian landscape. He may have failed to account for Polish sensitivities, whether through a lack of instinct, or even deliberately, on the grounds that no one has the right to dictate under what colours Ukrainian combat units fight their mortal struggle against the Russian invader.

Uncomfortable subjects

How did he arrive at UPA symbolism at all? Zelensky was born and raised in Kryvyi Rih in a Russian-speaking family. The history of the nationalist underground associated with the OUN and UPA was alien to that region and regarded with suspicion there long after Ukraine regained independence.

As recently as 2013, before the Revolution of Dignity and the onset of Russian aggression, 22 per cent of respondents expressed a positive view of the OUN-UPA's role during the Second World War, while 42 per cent held a negative one. The regional breakdown diverged sharply from the average: in eastern Ukraine, the president's home region, 66 per cent evaluated the OUN-UPA negatively, and only 9 per cent positively.

The picture began to change after 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and launched operations in the Donbas. In 2015, surveys by the Rating Group showed that positive assessments of the OUN-UPA outweighed negative ones for the first time – 41 per cent to 38 per cent – marking the start of growing social recognition of the nationalist underground's role in the struggle for Ukrainian independence. A decisive shift, however, came only after 24 February 2022.

Decolonisation

In my essay *The Great War*, I describe how the outbreak of full-scale war triggered a profound transformation of Ukrainian society.[1] Its central axis was a radical shift in attitudes towards Russians. I recall in that essay that as recently as November 2021, 75 per cent of Ukrainians expressed a positive attitude towards Russians living in Russia. Despite eight years of ongoing Russian aggression, Ukrainians regarded it as the work of the Moscow regime instead of blaming Russian society, with which many felt a degree of kinship. The invasion of 24 February, the martyrdom of Mariupol and the atrocities revealed in Bucha, Irpin and Izyum irreversibly cured Ukrainians of their Russian sympathies.

These events also accelerated what has come to be described as "decolonisation" – the process of liberation not only from political, but also cultural and psychological domination by the imperial power that Russia always was, or sought to be, in relation to Ukraine. The Revolution of Dignity had already hastened de-communisation and the break with the Soviet legacy, as expressed in the so-called Leninfall – the mass toppling of Vladimir Lenin's statues. The symbol of decolonisation proper became the Pushkinfall, or removal from public space of symbols of Russian cultural dominance: the pulling down of monuments to Russian cultural figures and the renaming of streets and institutions.

This cleansing through decolonisation is accompanied by a recovery of memory relating to Ukraine's own cultural identity – an identity that expresses Ukrainian distinctiveness and collective agency. One of the most significant books of 2025 is Vira Ageyeva's *Проти культурної амнезії. Есеї про національну пам'ять* (*Against Cultural Amnesia: Essays on National Memory and Identity*).[2] In it, she continues the analysis, featured in her earlier publications, of the mechanisms of colonial oppression under subjugation, as well as the difficult and ambiguous process of liberation from Russian influence in the years of independence.

Memory and identity

The shelves in Ukrainian bookshops are increasingly filled not only with essays, but also with fiction that explores questions of memory and identity. One cannot overlook the role of Oksana Zabuzhko, the most celebrated contemporary Ukrainian writer, whose 2010 novel, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*,[3] became a literary event and, simultaneously, an important milestone in the transformation

1 E. Bendyk, *The Great War*, Stefan Batory Foundation, Warsaw 2026, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Wielka-wojna.pdf.

2 В. Агеєва, *Проти культурної амнезії. Есеї про національну пам'ять*, Віхоли, Київ 2025.

3 O. Zabuzhko, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, translated by Nina Shevchuk-Murray. Las Vegas: AmazonCrossing 2012.

of Ukrainian consciousness. In her work, Zabuzhko also reclaimed the memory of participants in the independence underground – a memory that was still marginalised at the time, kept alive only in western Ukraine.

Contemporary Ukrainian literature is restoring figures that were cursed or simply forgotten under imperial rule to collective consciousness. Tanya Malyarchuk, in her superb novel *Forgottenness*,[4] brings the figure of Viacheslav Lypynsky – or Wacław Lipiński – to life. A Pole who consciously chose to belong to the Ukrainian nation, he became the principal philosopher of Ukrainian conservatism, closely associated with Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky.

The Ukrainian pantheon

The historical figures being brought back to life and introduced into the public imagination are populating a Ukrainian pantheon, reminding both Ukrainians and the world that this is a nation with centuries of cultural, political and indeed sovereign traditions: Ivan Mazepa, Symon Petliura, Pavlo Skoropadsky, as well as Stepan Bandera and the soldiers of the UPA, the communist Mykola Khvylovy and the participants of the Executed Renaissance – creators of the 1920s cultural renaissance in Soviet Ukraine.

All embody the slogan "Away from Moscow", authorship of which is attributed both to Mykola Khvylovy and the ideologist of Ukrainian nationalism, Dmytro Dontsov. Research published in October 2023 by the Centre for the Study of the Liberation Movement showed that 70 per cent of Ukrainians believe that "the UPA established the tradition of resistance to the aggressor". It is also worth recalling that an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians have no doubt that the war with Russia is existential – that what is at stake is the survival of their nation and state. In their view, defeat would mean extermination, whether physical or cultural.

This conviction that the war must be fought to a conclusion is accompanied by an awareness of the constant need to mobilise the resources required to wage it effectively. Ukrainians know that their fight is possible because of support from Western states – today, primarily Europe. At the same time, they remember that from the very first days they built their independence under conditions of strategic solitude. The nuclear disarmament undertaken in exchange for security guarantees set out in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum became a profound lesson, instilling a deep mistrust in international relations. The Memorandum did not prevent the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or the invasion of 2022. In fact, the aggressor was one of the signatories – Russia – while in 2014 the rest remained, in effect, passive.

Solitude

That experience is not the only one that leads Ukrainians to believe they can ultimately rely only on their own internal resources. External support, however indispensable, can be capricious and unpredictable. Ukraine felt this acutely in 2023, when the United States was unable to break through a congressional impasse over military aid legislation for more than six months. At the same time, Polish farmers blocked the border with Ukraine for many months and Polish governments – both the United Right and the October 15th Coalition – proved incapable of resolving a problem that had great

4 T. Malyarchuk, *Forgottenness: A Novel*, trans. Z. Tompkins, Liveright Publishing Corporation, New York, 2024.

strategic significance for Ukraine. Donald Trump's return to the US presidency in January 2025 taught further lessons in political realism.

Consolidating and mobilising internal resources requires not only remarkable social resilience and endurance of the hardships of war. Few examples are more telling than the way Ukrainians survived a brutal winter despite relentless bombardment and the destruction of energy and heating infrastructure. Despite catastrophic living conditions for hundreds of thousands of residents of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa and Dnipro, the will to resist grew rather than diminished, as opinion polls consistently confirmed.

Resilience

The attitudes expressed in surveys are corroborated by hard economic data and reports from the front. Ukraine has maintained macroeconomic stability, undisturbed even by the winter destruction of its energy infrastructure and the unrelenting bombardment of urban infrastructure. The scale of energy supply disruptions has fuelled anxiety about a potential economic collapse, yet the economic statistics have borne out the reassuring forecasts offered by the head of the National Bank of Ukraine in February 2026. Ukrainian GDP contracted in the first quarter of 2026 to be sure, but by only 0.5 per cent. Projections for subsequent quarters point to a renewed growth trajectory: GDP is expected to expand by 1.7 per cent in the second quarter, in line with the NBU's forecast.

Maintaining this stability would have been impossible, of course, without the systematic financing of Ukraine and its state expenditures by Western partners. All revenue from economic activity – collected through excise duties, taxes and customs – flows to the war effort. In macroeconomic terms, financing the war costs Ukraine nearly 36 to 37 per cent of its GDP, which translates into more than half of all state budget expenditures. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that the Ukrainian economy is not merely holding on – it is growing.

The most spectacular illustration is the defence sector, which today meets up to 60 per cent of the needs of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Initially, most material supply came from abroad. In 2022, the Ukrainian defence industry delivered weapons worth approximately one billion dollars; by 2025, that figure had risen to twelve billion. Output could have been higher still with greater financing. Most importantly, that growth was qualitative as well as quantitative.

This, of course, is a reference to the development of new weapons systems and launch of the capacity to produce innovative solutions – ones that have allowed Ukraine's Armed Forces to maintain strategic parity in the conduct of military operations and, in recent months, to begin seizing the strategic initiative. This is not the place for a detailed analysis of the Ukrainian defence sector. I cite its achievements as an illustration of Ukrainians' capacity to sustain their state as a system of institutions and actors capable of coordinated action aimed at prosecuting the war to a conclusion that will be acceptable to the Ukrainian sovereign: the people.

Social agency

This dimension of Ukrainian resistance – social agency – is difficult to understand, and not only for Vladimir Putin. Even the leaders of democratic states often struggle to grasp the constraints that bind Ukraine's political leadership, including President Zelensky. Despite what amounts to an authoritarian

consolidation of power, Zelensky is simultaneously a hostage of his society, which – even under wartime conditions – does not hesitate to assert its sovereign rights.

Few examples are more striking than the "cardboard revolution" of July 2025, when thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Ukrainian cities to protest against an attempt to curtail the powers of the institutions fighting corruption. Zelensky was forced to retreat from his plans, having discovered that the tactics he used with members of the Verkhovna Rada would not work with the broader public. Could it have been otherwise, given that Ukrainians regard corruption in the halls of power as a greater threat to Ukraine's development than the ongoing war with Russia? So, at least, suggest the findings of a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KMIS) at the end of April 2026: 54 per cent of respondents identified corruption as the greatest threat to Ukraine's future, while only 39 per cent named the war.

The Ukrainian president is also fully aware that in international negotiations aimed at ending the war, he is wholly dependent on the will of Ukrainian society. Any settlement that does not satisfy the majority – any rotten compromise along the lines of "land for peace" being floated by Donald Trump – will meet with resistance. The possibility of such a compromise is rejected outright by 57 per cent of respondents in the KMIS survey cited above. Those who might be willing to accept such an outcome refuse to see it formalised de jure and demand security guarantees in return.

Consolidation amid tensions

It must be acknowledged, however, that in the fifth, or de facto thirteenth year of the war, Ukrainian society is under increasing strain, resulting not only from the obvious exhaustion and stress of living under constant threat to life. The near-daily bombardment of Kyiv and the frequent targeting of other cities is a source of psychological depletion that takes a particularly heavy toll on children. Against this backdrop, however, daily life continues, with all the emotions generated by family, professional and public life.

Ukrainians are angered – as already noted – by corruption, of which the so-called Mindychgate affair became a symbol: a bribery scandal at the nuclear energy company Enerhoatom involving senior figures in power. A further source of tension is the manner in which military conscription is conducted, including both the avoidance of military service and unauthorised desertion. Ukrainians are ambivalent towards both phenomena, criticising "draft dodgers" on one hand while expressing understanding of the resistance to conscription on the other. The phenomenon stems not only from fear of death or disability, but often from a lack of trust in public institutions and a sense of injustice (compounded by corruption and accusations that military enlistment office staff can be bribed to secure exemptions).

Despite these tensions, growing criticism of Ukrainian authorities, and low approval ratings for the government and parliament, Ukrainian society maintains its unity and its readiness to wage war for as long as necessary. One pillar sustaining this consolidation is the consistently high level of trust in the armed forces, which has exceeded 90 per cent since the start of the war. A second pillar is trust in volunteers and civil society organisations, which complement – and frequently replace – public institutions across many crucial areas: from supplying the army with weapons and caring for veterans and internally displaced persons to looking after animals.

Despite criticism, Volodymyr Zelensky remains a symbol of Ukrainian unity. His approval rating holds at a relatively high 58 per cent. But competition is growing in the form of popular military commanders

such as Valerii Zaluzhnyi – the former commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, now ambassador to London – and Kyrylo Budanov, the legendary head of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence, now head of the Presidential Office.

A shared symbolic space

Social consolidation is sustained not only by social factors: culture has become an extraordinarily important binding force, helping Ukrainians search for answers to the question of who they are. This transformation of collective consciousness and self-identification is the key mechanism by which unity is maintained in diversity. The building blocks of this consciousness are an attachment to democratic values and a civic – rather than ethnic – conception of national identity: when asked "who are you?", 80 per cent of respondents answer, first and foremost, that they are citizens of Ukraine. Shortly before the war, that figure was 60 per cent; in 1991, in the first months after independence was regained, it was barely 40 per cent.

An important aspect of this consolidation is a shared symbolic space, one that furnishes concrete images and narratives in answering the question "who are you?" This space is filled by new understandings of history, which have emerged under the influence of decolonisation and contemporary reinterpretation. Part of this space has been filled by the memory of the independence underground associated with the OUN and UPA. That memory is a resource that lends context and force to the struggle against the Russian aggressor, because in popular understanding the UPA is not associated at all with the Ukrainian-Polish conflict during the war or with the Volhyn massacres. Ukrainians know little, if anything, about this and perceive the UPA as a symbol of defiance and the will to fight to the end, a fight that continued in the Carpathian forests into the 1950s and, even after the partisan units were crushed, was not extinguished but simply transferred to the Soviet camps.

This is a social and cultural fact in Ukraine today. We need not accept it, but we should understand its genesis and significance, if only because any understanding must include the recognition that no spectacular gesture on Poland's part will alter the shape and dynamics of socio-cultural processes in Ukraine. The greatest force shaping those processes is the war itself and the mortal threat posed by the Russian aggressor. In order to resist it effectively, Ukrainians are mobilising every material and symbolic resource at their disposal, summoning to the front not only the living, but also those who in past centuries demonstrated how to fight an empire and refuse to yield. The banners of combat units now depict figures from the Cossack past, from the era of the Ukrainian People's Republic and from the struggle against Soviet Moscow.

Lecturing Ukrainians about the banners under which they fight and die – not only for their own freedom and future, but in defending Poland and Europe from the Russian aggressor – can only produce the opposite effect, contributing to an anti-Polish shift in Ukrainian sentiment. As research by the Miroszewski Centre shows (carried out at the end of 2025), Poles are currently regarded by Ukrainians as the nation that is culturally closest to them, as asserted by 44 per cent of respondents, placing Poland head and shoulders above other nations neighbouring Ukraine; 43 per cent of Ukrainians hold good or very good opinions of Poles, while only 8 per cent hold negative ones.

I am not suggesting that, for the sake of preserving goodwill, we should abandon our own memory or avoid discussion of difficult subjects and tragic shared history. But the question is: should this be the priority of Polish policy and the foundation of Polish-Ukrainian relations at the present moment? It is worth recalling that in a survey conducted by CBOS shortly after the Russian drone attack on

Polish airspace in September 2025, 63 per cent of respondents answered “yes” to the question “Do you believe that Poland’s independence is currently under threat?”, while only 26 per cent said no. A separate survey by ABR SESTA for Ringier Axel Springer Polska found that as many as 71 per cent of respondents fear an attack by another state on Poland above all else.

History stirs emotions and often legitimate expectations, but the present brings different problems of fundamental, even existential significance. Even if the fears of Poles are exaggerated, they are nonetheless a social fact, which hide a deeper anxiety: are we adequately prepared to meet the threats we face? The answer to this question is complex, requiring both an analysis of domestic policy and a careful examination of international relations to assess what Poland’s security architecture actually looks like and how it is tied to the system of economic development necessary to finance that security.

The search for an answer to that question should include the question of Ukraine and the post-war future of Ukraine, Poland and Europe. The first step in formulating a response concerns the end of the war, bound up with the challenge of building a continental security architecture. Through its effective, many-year resistance, Ukraine has proven that it is more than merely a “buffer” separating Europe from neo-imperial Russia. Ukrainian politicians and experts argue that Ukraine, with its growing wartime experience, will serve as a pillar of the future European security order.

A question about the future

These arguments have gained greater traction in light of an increasingly erratic US policy towards NATO and Europe. Ukraine will not, of course, replace the United States as a security guarantor. But given the necessity of building a new architecture given the reduction – or even withdrawal – of American engagement, Ukraine’s contribution will be of extraordinary importance and not only because Ukraine provides natural “strategic depth” for European states, but also because it has mastered and developed a method for containing a ruthless aggressor – one based on military capabilities as well as on the socio-economic and cultural capacities that form the bedrock for effective military action.

For Ukraine to play the role of an active sub-system within European security architecture, it must be integrated into the other systems that constitute the European space. The most important of these is the European Union. Only the fastest possible and genuine – that is, criteria-based – integration of Ukraine into the EU will secure the conditions for its economic development. That development, in turn, is a prerequisite for Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction and social reintegration, the central challenge of which will be the reintegration of veterans and displaced persons.

Ukrainians have been discussing this process since the beginning of the war. They draw strength not only from history, but also from narrating a future – one which the majority of Ukrainians believe will be better and in which Ukraine will, within ten years, become a thriving state within the European Union.

This thinking about the future fills not only the pages of essay collections and futurist fiction, of which there is truly no shortage in Ukraine right now. Expert groups are also engaging in systematic future-oriented thinking and, through models of private-social partnership, organising design processes for future development. One of these spaces is the independent think tank Ukrainian Institute

of the Future (UIF). At the end of last year, the UIF published a report from a months-long foresight project, the outcome of which is the *Vision of Ukraine 2035*.[5]

Shaping the post-war future is both a challenge and an opportunity for Poland. The extent to which we engage in this process and how far we use it as a vehicle for shaping Poland's own future will depend on the assumptions we bring to the design work. Talk of reconstruction emphasises an asymmetric relationship between Ukraine and Poland and the other partner states, suggesting that Ukraine is the weaker party in need of assistance.

Yes, reconstruction must and will be an important dimension of the process – a process that should, however, be framed far more broadly, and as has already been noted, will concern not only Ukraine but Poland and other European states as well. This will create the blueprint for Europe's future as an expansion of the space of security, prosperity and development, with Ukraine's integration into the European Union as its principal vehicle. Framed in this way, the task offers the prospect of building far more symmetrical, partnership-based relations among all participants in a process whose success will depend on the ability to harness the resources that all participants bring.

The above-mentioned proposal is not wishful thinking. It is already being realised by civil society organisations from Ukraine, Poland and many other states – primarily European – engaged in wartime support for Ukrainian society and joint future-design work. An example of this engagement is the XIX Poland-Ukraine Forum in Kyiv mentioned earlier, a significant, but by no means isolated event in the preparations for the Gdańsk Ukraine Recovery Conference 2026.

This intergovernmental undertaking is an opportunity to consolidate the efforts of civil society communities, which came together on 26 January of this year at the Stefan Batory Foundation in Warsaw to begin work on shared programmatic engagement in designing the post-war future of Ukraine and Europe. The culmination of this effort will be the Civil Society Forum, to be held on 24 June at the European Solidarity Centre on the eve of the opening of URC Gdańsk 2026. Hundreds of representatives of civic communities have signalled their intention to attend.

"Poland and Ukraine: Overcoming the Past, Winning the Future" is the latest in a series of analyses devoted to various aspects of Ukraine's functioning and that of Ukrainian society during the war, and to the consequences of this war for the future of Ukraine, Poland, Europe and the world.

Notes

Edwin Bendyk is the President of the Stefan Batory Foundation. He is a journalist, writer, and columnist for the weekly Polityka. His work focuses on civilisational issues and the relationships between science, technology, politics, the economy, culture, and social life. He co-founded the Center for Future Studies at Collegium Civitas and is a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. He has published several books, including *Miłość, wojna, rewolucja. Szkice na czas kryzysu* (*Love, War, Revolution: Essays for a Time of Crisis*, 2009), *Bunt sieci* (*The Network Revolt*, 2012), and *W Polsce, czyli wszędzie. Rzecz o upadku i przyszłości świata* (*In Poland, or Anywhere: On the Collapse and Future of the World*, 2020), *Prawda po wyborach 15 października 2023* (*The Truth after the Elections on October 15, 2023*; 2024, ed., with Przemysław Czapliński and Piotr Kosiewski). He also runs the blog Antymatrix.

5 *Vision of Ukraine 2035*, Ukrainian Institute of the Future, 2025, https://uifuture.org/proyekty/viziya-ukrayiny-2035-2/.

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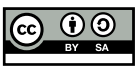

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