

Transcending Parochial Interests: A Reply to Mykola Riabchuk

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(Since the editors at *Zbruch* did not reply to my request for an opportunity to reply on their web site, I am posting my own reply and welcome its distribution).

The Ukrainian intellectual journal [Zbruch](#) recently featured a long article about pro-Russian academics by the well known Ukrainian commentator Mykola Riabchuk. He describes his piece as a sequel to a report by [Kateryna Smaglyi](#) on pro-Kremlin propaganda in Western think tanks and universities.

Although I am not mentioned at all in Smaglyi's report, Riabchuk devotes a great deal of attention to me in his article. That per se does not warrant any attention, but his analysis raises some conceptual issues that merit a brief response.

Riabchuk attacks my overall conception of Russian-Ukrainian relations as "primordialism." Fair enough, but he leaves out the reasoning behind it. What he calls primordialism is based on the common European origins of the three main branches of Eastern Slavic cultures –Russia, Ukraine, Belarus. I trust that much is not in dispute.

Based on this, it is my contention that restoring the ties between Ukraine (and other Orthodox Slavic cultures) and Europe is a very good thing, especially if it broadens the current concept of "Europe" from just Western Europe to include its Eastern European half.

The need for such a broad conceptual and intellectual re-integration stems from the division of Europe that was forged by the Cold War, as a result of which Western Europe became a synecdoche for all of Europe. The political and military institutions of this amputated Europe granted priority to the cultural values and largely secular traditions of the traditionally Protestant nations of Western Europe. The Catholic countries of southern Europe were regarded as junior partners in this arrangement, while the Eastern and predominantly Orthodox regions of Europe were simply written off as no longer part of European civilization at all.

Today, this is no longer a convenient arrangement for traditional Catholic countries, like Italy, or for countries that strive to retain their own national

and religious distinctiveness, like Hungary, or for minorities that strive to maintain their own distinctiveness amidst a majority population, like the Catalans in Spain. Such, dare I say it, primordial identities are at odds with the secularism and individualism that have come to dominate Western European politics. In their efforts to change the status quo, some of these groups now regard Orthodox Slavs as potential partners.

This leads to two conclusions that some Ukrainians might find difficult to swallow.

The first is that Europe will never allow Ukraine to fully join European institutions without also accommodating Russia because it would result in an endless economic and security nightmare for Western Europeans, who hold the organizational reins of power. The second is that integrating any one of the three core Orthodox countries of the former Soviet Union—Belarus, Russia, Ukraine—into Europe will require that all of them grow much closer to each other. This, in fact, is Western Europe's preferred solution to the continent's security dilemma with Russia.

Therein lies the conflict for Ukrainian nationalists—the closer Ukraine gets to Europe, the closer it must get to Russia, because European institutions exist for the integration, not separation, of cultures and peoples. Moreover, shifting political coalitions within European nations will not change this, since the European Union was specifically designed to transcend the "parochial" interests of individual nation-states.

The current European debate over Ukraine is therefore between those who believe that the ultimate goal of a "Europe whole and free" can be achieved more quickly by prioritizing Ukraine's integration, and those who believe it will occur more quickly by prioritizing Russia's integration. Such disagreements are purely tactical, however, and should not blind anyone to the fact that the end goal is the same—a Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus that are as intimately intertwined with each other as they are with the rest of Europe.

Whether this is an acceptable outcome, after all the sacrifices that have been made on behalf of for Ukraine's "civilizational choice," is a debate that Ukrainian elites have yet to even begin.

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