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Culture as a Construct within the Educational Discourse. Ukrainian Reflections

Abstract

This report examines the conceptualization and application of culture within Ukrainian educational discourse, particularly in the context of the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. It identifies a central tension between the necessity of consolidating national identity through national-patriotic education and the parallel commitment to international standards of diversity and intercultural understanding required for European Union integration. While the official curriculum incorporates “cultural competence” as a core pillar of the New Ukrainian School reform, the practical implementation of diversity pedagogy is heavily influenced by the imperatives of cultural sovereignty, de-Russification, and the integration of internally displaced persons. The analysis reveals that although legislative frameworks support tolerance and respect for diversity, a significant gap persists in teacher preparation regarding specific methodologies for intercultural dialogue. Comparatively, Ukraine’s approach is distinguished from Western European models by its focus on national resilience and the immediate psychological and social needs of a war-affected population. The report concludes that while conflict has accelerated the prioritization of a monolingualistic national identity, balancing this with inclusive, pluralistic educational goals remains a primary pedagogical challenge for Ukraine’s future societal development.

Keywords: *cultural competence, national-patriotic education, cultural diversity, New Ukrainian School (NUS), de-Russification, intercultural education, war-affected education*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Bericht untersucht die Konzeptualisierung und Anwendung von Kultur im ukrainischen Bildungsdiskurs, insbesondere im Zusammenhang mit der umfassenden russischen Invasion im Jahr 2022. Er identifiziert einen zentralen Konflikt zwischen der Notwendigkeit, die nationale Identität durch national-patriotische Bildung zu festigen, und der gleichzeitigen Verpflichtung zu internationalen Standards der Vielfalt und des interkulturellen Verständnisses, die für die Integration in die Europäische Union erforderlich sind. Während der offizielle Lehrplan

„kulturelle Kompetenz“ als einen Kernpfeiler der Reform der neuen ukrainischen Schule beinhaltet, wird die praktische Umsetzung der Diversitätspädagogik stark von den Erfordernissen der kulturellen Souveränität, der Entrussifizierung und der Integration von Binnenvertriebenen beeinflusst. Die Analyse zeigt, dass zwar die gesetzlichen Rahmenbedingungen Toleranz und Respekt für Vielfalt unterstützen, aber bei der Vorbereitung der Lehrkräfte hinsichtlich spezifischer Methoden für den interkulturellen Dialog nach wie vor eine erhebliche Lücke besteht. Im Vergleich zu westeuropäischen Modellen zeichnet sich der Ansatz der Ukraine durch seinen Fokus auf nationale Resilienz und die unmittelbaren psychologischen und sozialen Bedürfnisse einer vom Krieg betroffenen Bevölkerung aus. Der Bericht kommt zu dem Schluss, dass der Konflikt zwar die Priorisierung einer monolingualen nationalen Identität beschleunigt hat, die Ausgewogenheit zwischen dieser und inklusiven, pluralistischen Bildungszielen jedoch eine zentrale pädagogische Herausforderung für die zukünftige gesellschaftliche Entwicklung der Ukraine bleibt.

Schlüsselworte: *kulturelle Kompetenz, national-patriotische Erziehung, kulturelle Vielfalt, Neue Ukrainische Schule (NUS), Entrussifizierung, interkulturelle Bildung, kriegsbeeinträchtigte Bildung*

Introduction

Culture plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities, influencing social structures and interactions. In contemporary Ukraine — undergoing significant transformation while defending its sovereignty — this role is especially salient. Culture encompasses both tangible elements (arts, literature, traditions) and intangible aspects (values, language, identity, daily practices). This report explores how this complex concept is defined, applied, and debated in Ukrainian educational discourse.

Understanding this context requires reflecting on the Soviet legacy. Though “proletarian internationalism” claimed to celebrate cultural diversity, it often enabled Russification and suppressed national identities, including Ukrainian. Ukraine’s independence in 1991

launched a phase of nation-building and cultural revival, which accelerated after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the Donbas war. The 2022 full-scale invasion further intensified this trajectory, reshaping cultural and educational priorities.

This report addresses four core questions: the presence of “cultural education/pedagogy” in Ukraine; the themes and norms around teaching culture; which cultural aspects are emphasized in policy and academia; and the institutional guidance for educators on cultural diversity. The analysis reveals ongoing tensions between the need to consolidate national identity — amplified by war — and the pursuit of international norms on diversity, human rights, and intercultural understanding, particularly in the context of Ukraine's EU integration (Barnett, n.d.; Likhachov, 2024).

Culture and Education

The German term *Kulturpädagogik*, linked to arts-based cultural education as in Germany's *Kulturschule*, lacks a direct equivalent in Ukraine's official or academic discourse (Kryvko, 2023). Nonetheless, similar aims are pursued through domestically framed concepts. Ukraine's approach is less centered on arts pedagogy and more on fostering identity, transmitting values, and promoting social cohesion in a national context.

A key concept is *cultural competence* (ukr. культурна компетентність), introduced in 2017 as one of the ten core competencies of the New Ukrainian School (NUS) reform (MESU, 2016). It includes understanding cultural specificities at national, regional, and global levels; valuing heritage; respecting cultural self-identification; encouraging creative expression; and supporting intercultural dialogue. This aligns with European educational standards and is a mandatory learning outcome in the 2020 State Standard (KMU, 2020).

In parallel, academic discourse has embraced *polycultural and intercultural education*, often seen as interchangeable (Ivashko & Kohut, 2012; Zajackiwska, 2015). These concepts, informed by Western models but adapted to local conditions, address the integration of historical minorities (e.g., Hungarians, Romanians, Poles) and the educational needs of the growing number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) since 2014.

The most prominent and state-supported cultural pedagogy is *national-patriotic education* (ukr. національно-патріотичне виховання). While present since independence, its role expanded after 2014 in response to Russian aggression and was further intensified following the 2022 invasion. It focuses on Ukrainian resilience, language, identity, civic duty, and defense readiness, and is embedded in strategies through 2028 and 2030 (KMU, 2020; 2024). These strands converge in several pedagogical principles:

- *formation of Ukrainian National and Civic Identity*: A primary goal across educational levels (KMU, 2024),
- *valuing Ukrainian Culture*: Emphasis on Ukrainian

language, history, literature, traditions, and symbols, increasingly framed through narratives of resilience and distinction from Russian influence,

- *respect for Cultural Diversity and Human Rights*: Officially mandated through the Law on Education (Verkhovna Rada, 2017) and NUS principles (MESU, 2016),
- *fostering Tolerance and Intercultural Dialogue*: Stated goals within policy documents (KMU, 2020),
- *promoting Democratic Values and Citizenship*: Integrated primarily through Civic Education (MESU, n.d.),
- *creative Self-Expression*: Included as an element of cultural competence (MESU, n.d.).

Non-formal actors like museums and libraries complement formal education with cultural programs.

A key challenge is the tension between the strong national-patriotic narrative, aimed at unity amid existential threat (MESU, 2022c), and the parallel goals of diversity, dialogue, and democratic inclusion rooted in international standards (MESU, 2016; Verkhovna Rada, 2017). Balancing these priorities remains a central pedagogical dilemma in Ukraine's education system.

Culture as a topic in school

The Ukrainian school curriculum addresses culture both explicitly (through dedicated subjects) and implicitly across disciplines. The thematic and normative approach to cultural education has evolved notably in response to shifting socio-political conditions. In this section, the analysis focuses specifically on the education policy discourse, as articulated in ministerial documents, state standards, and official guidelines. While academic and political debates form the broader context, it is policy texts that directly shape how culture is framed, operationalized, and implemented in the school curriculum.

Thematic Focus

Culture is primarily taught through Ukrainian Language and Literature, History, Art, Music, and Civic Education (KMU, 2020). The curricular content centers on specific subject matter:

- *Ukrainian National Identity*: Central to education is affirming a distinct Ukrainian identity through language, literature, history, folklore, and national symbols. This counters imperial and Soviet narratives, underscoring resilience, and European orientation (MESU, 2022d),
- *De-Russification*: Since 2014, and especially after 2022, curricula have reduced or recontextualized Russian cultural content, asserting cultural sovereignty, and reframing relations with Russia (MESU, 2022c),
- *European Values*: Topics like democracy, tolerance, and human rights have gained prominence, reflecting EU integration goals (KMU, 2020),
- *Cultural Diversity in Ukraine*: While national minorities and regional cultures are acknowledged (e.g., Crimean

Tatars, Hungarians, Poles), their inclusion is often framed through national unity (Verkhovna Rada, 2017),

- *Universal Human Values*: Core NUS themes include dignity, freedom, equality, and rights (MESU, 2016).

Taken together, these thematic elements reflect how culture is formalized within the curriculum through policy-driven definitions of content and learning outcomes. At the same time, they point to the broader expectations placed on schools to shape cultural understanding in ways that align with current national priorities. This creates a foundation for the normative dimension of cultural education, where attention shifts from what cultural themes are included to how educators are expected to address them in practice.

Normative Discourse on Addressing Culture

Beyond the subject matter, educational policy sets clear expectations for the pedagogical approach used to handle cultural topics:

- *Legal and policy frameworks*: These mandate inclusion, tolerance, and nondiscrimination, with cultural competence defined as a mandatory learning outcome (Verkhovna Rada, 2017; MESU, n.d.; KMU, 2020),
- *Intercultural Dialogue*: Official guidelines encourage mutual understanding and recommend specific tolerance-building activities within the classroom (MESU, 2020),
- *The pedagogical challenge of “the other”*: While tolerance is endorsed, the wartime emphasis on defending Ukrainian identity complicates representations of “the other”, especially Russian culture, necessitating a careful pedagogy to avoid harmful generalizations (MESU, 2022c),
- *Diversity Pedagogy*: Initiatives regarding diversity are often framed strictly within the goals of national unity (KMU, 2024). This pedagogical framing can reduce the space for critical reflection on cultural power dynamics.

Overall, there remains a normative tension between fostering patriotic unity — amplified by war — and promoting inclusive, intercultural education (MESU, 2016; Verkhovna Rada, 2017). This tension operates not only at the level of declared principles but also within the pedagogical expectations placed on teachers. While the thematic content of cultural education outlines what students should learn — including Ukrainian identity, de-Russification, European values, and recognition of minorities — the normative layer concerns how educators are expected to approach these topics in practice.

In wartime conditions, the emphasis on cohesion, resilience, and cultural distinction often becomes the dominant pedagogical imperative, shaping the acceptable ways of engaging with cultural topics. Teachers are thus required to reconcile the state-driven priority of national consolidation with the simultaneous expectation to cultivate tolerance, openness, and intercultural dialogue.

Current realities tend to prioritize cohesion and cultural distinction over broader multicultural engagement, narrowing the space for critical reflection on diversity or for dialogical encounters between different cultural perspectives. As a result, the normative discourse increasingly influences not only what is taught but also the pedagogical boundaries within which cultural education is enacted.

Culture as part of educational discourse

Beyond being a subject of study, “culture” significantly shapes the educational context in Ukraine. Scientific and political discourse highlights key aspects where culture influences educational policies, practices, and challenges.

- *National Identity Consolidation*: Culture is often seen as the foundation of the Ukrainian nation-state (KMU, 2024). Education plays a central role in forging national identity, promoting the Ukrainian language, and cultivating civic consciousness (MESU, 2022c). This is especially important in countering Russification and resisting Russian aggression, where cultural sovereignty is linked to political sovereignty and national security. Educational policies are shaped by this nation-building imperative.
- *Language Politics*: The Ukrainian language is viewed as central to national culture and identity. Policies surrounding its role in education aim to strengthen the use of Ukrainian language and reverse past Russification, while balancing minority language rights (Verkhovna Rada, 2019; Language Ombudsman of Ukraine, 2021). In a significant shift on December 3, 2025, the Verkhovna Rada adopted legislation (Draft Law No. 14120) to update the official translation and ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This amendment removed Russian from the list of languages requiring state protection within the framework of the Charter (Verkhovna Rada, 2025).
- *Integration of Diverse Groups*: Ukraine’s diverse populations shape education: 1) *Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees*: Since 2014, millions of Ukrainians have been displaced. Their integration into schools involves addressing practical needs, providing psychosocial support, ensuring educational continuity, and fostering social cohesion. Recent changes to distance learning have raised concerns about their impact on IDPs and children in occupied areas (Zmina.info, 2024a). The cultural context involves shared nationality but diverse regional backgrounds and war experiences. 2) *National and Linguistic Minorities*: Ukraine is home to various national minorities. Balancing the promotion of the national language with the rights of these minorities to preserve their languages and cultures remains a challenge (Verkhovna Rada, 2019; Likhachov, 2024). Legislative changes in late 2023 aimed to expand minority language use, particularly in education, in response to European integration, but not the Russian language (Likhachov, 2024). According to mo-

monitoring data from the State Service for Education Quality and the Language Ombudsman's office conducted in early 2025, approximately 52% of schoolchildren across Ukraine continue to speak Russian during breaks, while in the capital, Kyiv, this figure reaches a significant 82%, while only 18% of students in Kyiv report speaking exclusively Ukrainian in the school environment (Radio Svoboda, 2025). These statistics have triggered a sharp negative reaction from the Language Ombudsman, who described the situation as a “threatening trend” resulting from insufficient institutional attention to language habits and the lingering influence of Russian digital content (UNN, 2025). In response, legislative efforts have intensified with the introduction of Bill No. 12086, which seeks to mandate a strictly “Ukrainian-language educational environment” by prohibiting the use of Russian during breaks and private communication on school grounds. While the Ministry of Education and Science supports the bill as a measure for national security and decolonization, critics and legal analysts argue that such a total ban on private speech may be perceived as a threat to personal freedom and a violation of fundamental human rights (Zmina.info, 2024b).

- *European Integration:* Ukraine's aspiration for European integration influences educational discourse (Shvachka, 2011). Reforms like the NUS aim to align Ukrainian education with European standards and values, including democratic principles, human rights, and cultural awareness (MESU, n.d.; KMU, 2020).

The ongoing war with Russia and the drive for European integration shape how culture is viewed in Ukraine. The need for national consolidation and resilience influences responses to internal diversity, often prioritizing unity and security, especially in relation to IDPs and historical minorities (KMU, 2024; MESU, 2022d). The debates around national minorities illustrate the intersection of cultural context with national identity, minority rights, and international relations, presenting ongoing challenges for the education system (Likhachov, 2024).

Dealing with culture within teacher education

The Ukrainian government, through the Ministry of Education and Science (MESU), has established policies addressing cultural diversity within the education system. However, translating these policies into effective classroom practices, especially through teacher preparation, remains a work in progress.

Official Institutional Discourse

Key legislative and policy documents outline the state's position on cultural diversity:

- the Law on Education (2017) promotes principles like humanism, democracy, tolerance, and national consciousness alongside understanding diversity (Verkhovna Rada, 2017),

- the New Ukrainian School (NUS) concept includes “cultural competence” as a key learning outcome, emphasizing respect for diversity and intercultural dialogue (MESU, 2016; MESU, n.d.),
- the State Standard of Basic Secondary Education (2020) mandates the development of social, civic, and cultural competences, requiring students to understand and respect cultural diversity and human rights (KMU, 2020).

Based on these frameworks, the Ministry of Education and Science issues guidelines encouraging schools to promote tolerance, mutual understanding, and civic values. However, these activities are often framed within the goal of fostering national unity and patriotism, reflecting prevailing political priorities (KMU, 2024; MESU, 2022c). While promoting tolerance, the guidance lacks specific pedagogical strategies for addressing cultural differences or conflicts (NUS, 2020).

Teacher Handling Cultural Diversity – Main Topics

The official discourse sets expectations for how teachers should address cultural diversity:

- *Cultural Competence:* Teachers are expected to implement curricula that foster cultural competence in students (KMU, 2020),
- *promoting Tolerance and Non-Discrimination:* Teachers are expected to create inclusive environments free from discrimination based on cultural, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds (KMU, 2020),
- *supporting IDPs and Refugees:* Teachers are focused on supporting displaced children, addressing trauma, and promoting solidarity (MESU, 2022a),
- *Language Support:* All teachers are expected to manage linguistic diversity and support students learning in Ukrainian (Language Ombudsman of Ukraine, n.d.),
- *instilling National Identity and Values:* Teachers are tasked with cultivating Ukrainian national identity and patriotism, particularly in the context of external threats (MESU, 2022c; KMU, 2024).

Teacher Preparation

Despite clear policy mandates, there is a gap between goals for handling cultural diversity and the practical preparation teachers receive. While training programs likely cover NUS principles and civic education, reports suggest a lack of concrete methodologies for effective intercultural education (Barnett, n.d.; Shvachka et al., 2022). Teachers may lack the skills to navigate cultural discussions, address prejudice, or adapt materials for diverse learners (Living Democracy, n.d.; Zaliznychne School Teacher, n.d.). This gap between policy and practical training is a critical bottleneck. The effectiveness of policies on cultural diversity depends on teachers' ability to implement them meaningfully in classrooms.

While supporting internally displaced students (IDPs) and addressing the rights and needs of national and linguistic minorities are both crucial components of

diversity management, the prevailing focus on national identity and security may divert attention from developing deeper intercultural competencies. As a result, national consolidation often takes precedence over broader diversity education goals.

These historical and policy shifts can be systematized across four major periods of Ukrainian educational development. To illustrate these shifts in a comparative and chronological format, Table 1 presents a structured summary of the key policy documents, dominant cultural concepts, and contextual drivers shaping cultural and diversity discourse in education.

Comparative perspectives

Situating Ukraine's discourse on culture in education within a broader European context provides useful insights. Comparisons with Germany and Sweden, with different historical approaches to diversity and cultural education, highlight key features of Ukraine's approach:

- **Conceptualization:** Ukraine's focus on "cultural competence" aligns with European trends but is closely tied to national identity consolidation and managing diversity related to national minorities and IDPs. This contrasts with Germany's "Kulturschule" model, which emphasizes arts and creative expression, and Sweden's integration of multiculturalism and democratic values in its curriculum, reflecting its history as an immigration country. Ukraine's focus is shaped by war and nation-building, prioritizing Ukrainian national cohesion and resilience,
- **Teacher Training:** The gap in practical intercultural training for Ukrainian teachers is not unique, but it is compounded by the need to train teachers in national-patriotic education and psychosocial support for war-affected children. This diverts attention from developing nuanced intercultural pedagogy, unlike Germany and Sweden, where dedicated intercultural education programs are more established,
- **Balancing National Identity and Diversity:** Ukraine's focus on national unity and cultural sovereignty is driven by external aggression, contrasting with Sweden's multicultural framework and Germany's emphasis on civic identity and confronting historical responsibility. The Ukrainian context demonstrates how conflict can shift the balance towards nation-building within cultural education discourse.

These comparisons show that while Ukraine engages with international concepts of cultural competence, its historical context and war heavily influence the prioritization of these concepts in education.

Conclusion

The discourse on culture within Ukrainian education is complex and shaped by historical and pre-sent struggles. Key points include:

- concepts like "cultural competence" and "national-patriotic education" influence pedagogy. Central principles focus on fostering Ukrainian identity, democratic values, and respect for diversity (Verkhovna Rada, 2017; MESU, 2016),

Time Period	Key Policy Documents/ Reforms	Dominant Concepts Related to Culture	Stated Approach to Diversity/Minorities	Key Drivers/Context
Soviet Era (pre 1991)	Soviet Constitution, Education Laws	Proletarian Internationalism, Socialist Culture, Russian Language Dominance	Formal recognition of nationalities, practical Russification	Communist ideology, Centralized control
1991-2013	Constitution (1996), Early Education Laws	National Identity Revival, Ukrainian Language Promotion, Cultural Heritage	Recognition of minority rights (Likhachov, 2024), Gradual Ukrainization of education	Postindependence nation-building, State formation
2014-2021	Law on Education (2017), NUS Concept, State Standard (2020)	National-Patriotic Education, Cultural Competence, Civic Identity, Intercultural Dialogue	Increased focus on Ukrainian language, Integration of IDPs, Continued minority rights debates, Emphasis on unity	Russian aggression (Crimea, Donbas), European integration drive
2022-Present	Wartime decrees/guidelines, Continued NUS implementation	Intensified National-Patriotic Education, Resilience, DeRussification, Cultural Sovereignty	Urgent focus on IDP/refugee integration, Emphasis on national unity/security, Continued de-Russification in cultural sphere	Full-scale Russian invasion, National survival

Table 1: Evolution of Policy Discourse on Culture and Diversity in Ukrainian Education

- culture in Ukrainian schools is heavily centered on monolingualistic national identity, history, and resilience, especially since 2014 and 2022, with a focus on differentiation from Russian influence (MESU, 2022c). Although tolerance is promoted, the national consolidation priority shaped by war affects practical implementation,
- cultural context influences education through national identity building, language politics, and integrating IDPs and refugees, with the geopolitical situation shaping this context,
- policies mandate respect for diversity and cultural competence (Verkhovna Rada, 2017; MESU, 2016), but a gap exists between policy goals and teacher training, especially in intercultural pedagogy (Barnett, n.d.; Shvachka et al., 2022). Teacher preparation faces competing demands, notably the focus on war-affected children and patriotism (MESU, 2022c; UNESCO, 2024).

The analysis reveals a tension between national unity and identity consolidation, intensified by external military aggression, and the adoption of international norms for diversity and intercultural understanding. The war accelerates the focus on Ukrainian linguistic identity and de-Russification, influencing how diversity is approached and prioritized. While policies support intercultural ideals, the practical realities of conflict and gaps in teacher preparation present challenges in fully achieving these goals. The needs of IDPs and refugees have become central to diversity management in schools.

These findings have implications for social cohesion, minority experiences, and Ukraine's European integration, which requires commitment to diversity and human rights. Future research should explore classroom practices, regional teacher training differences, and the impact of NUS reforms on cultural competencies amidst conflict. Understanding Ukraine's navigation of culture, identity, diversity, and education is crucial for its societal development and resilience.

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