

## Episode 2: “Artificial Intelligence Discusses Nikolai Gogol”

This podcast episode examines the identity of Nikolai Gogol, a writer born and raised in Ukraine who wrote in Russian during the Russian Empire. The discussion highlights aspects of Oleh S. Ilnytskyj’s academic work *Nikolai Gogol: Ukrainian Writer in the Empire. A Study in Identity* (<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111373263>).

Ilnytskyj delves into the intricate relationship between Nikolai Gogol, his Ukrainian identity, and his contributions to both Ukrainian and Russian literature. He challenges the traditional portrayal of Gogol as a 'Russian' writer, asserting that Gogol was fundamentally Ukrainian, even as he wrote in Russian within the imperial cultural framework. The book examines critical responses to Gogol's work, shedding light on the conflicting interpretations of his nationality and the competing narratives of Ukrainian and Russian identities within the Russian Empire. Ilnytskyj illustrates how Russian intellectuals appropriated Gogol's work to advance their own national narratives and how both Gogol and Ukrainian intellectuals resisted these efforts. Ultimately, the study re-evaluates Gogol’s legacy, firmly anchoring him within the broader history of Ukrainian culture and identity as it evolved under imperial rule.

### Transcript 2

**[Male AI]:** All right, let's jump into another deep dive. This time we're tackling a listener request, and it's a juicy one. You want to understand how two scholars, Ilnytskyj and Bojanowska, view Nikolai Gogol’s national identity.

**[Female AI]:** Oh, this is going to be good.

**[Male AI]:** Yeah. And how this whole all-Russian idea plays into it. See, Gogol is this giant of Russian literature, right?

**[Female AI]:** Quintessential Russian writer.

**[Male AI]:** But the sources you sent over, well, they kind of flip that on its head.

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. It's like looking at a familiar painting in a new light, right? You suddenly notice details, textures you'd never seen before.

**[Male AI]:** Totally. So most scholars—we're talking big names like Donald Fanger, Clarence Brown, Robert Maguire, even Boris Gasparov...

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. They all put Gogol firmly in the Russian camp.

**[Male AI]:** Right, in the Russian tradition. And their arguments make sense on the surface, right? Gogol wrote in Russian. His work resonated with Russian audiences. And the idea of a separate Ukrainian identity back then, well, it's often downplayed.

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. It's almost like Ukrainian identity is treated as this afterthought, a modern invention, as if it couldn't have influenced someone writing in the 19th century.

**[Male AI]:** Right. Like it just popped out of nowhere. But that feels way too simplistic, don't you think? Especially when you consider the mix of languages and cultures in the Russian Empire back then.

**[Female AI]:** Totally agree. The sources you shared really hit on this point. Attributing Gogol's Russianness solely to his language, well, it ignores the nuances of the time.

**[Male AI]:** Not that simple.

**[Female AI]:** No, not at all. And that's where this idea of Imperial Culture becomes really important.

**[Male AI]:** Okay. So, we're not talking about just Russian culture here.

**[Female AI]:** No, it was a melting pot. You had Ukrainian intellectuals, Russian intellectuals, all coexisting, but each with their own visions for their nation's future.

**[Male AI]:** So, not a simple binary—more like a vibrant tapestry, right?

**[Female AI]:** Absolutely. A dynamic cultural landscape. And within all that, you have the emergence of this all-Russian idea, which I think is central to how we view Gogol even today.

**[Male AI]:** It's at the core of it all.

**[Female AI]:** Absolutely.

**[Male AI]:** Okay. So, break it down for us. What exactly was this all-Russian idea?

**[Female AI]:** Well, in essence, it was an attempt to merge—you know, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Great Russians—all into this single Russian nation. They even went as far as claiming Kyivan Rus', this ancient East Slavic state, as inherently Russian.

**[Male AI]:** Whoa. So, they're not just claiming territory; they're absorbing Ukrainian identity, Ukrainian history, into a Russian narrative.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. And you can see how this lens—this all-Russian lens with its tendency to view Ukrainians as simply Russians—has really shaped how we see Gogol.

**[Male AI]:** It's like a filter.

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. And it distorts the picture.

**[Male AI]:** It creates a blind spot for Gogol's Ukrainian roots.

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. I mean, even today, you see this legacy. Take *The Guardian*, for example. They recently claimed Gogol is 100% Russian. [AI misconstrues this; the newspaper reported on a Russian expert who made that claim. It was not the paper's claim—OSI.]

**[Male AI]:** Wow. That's a bold statement considering what we're seeing in these sources.

**[Female AI]:** It is. And it highlights how deeply ingrained this perception is, even in modern discussions of Gogol.

**[Male AI]:** So, it's not just about Gogol himself. It's about a whole system of thought, a way of viewing history and culture that continues to impact how we understand it.

**[Female AI]:** Precisely. The sources you've brought up argue that Gogol, despite writing in Russian, was actually a forerunner to modern Ukrainian national consciousness.

**[Male AI]:** A precursor.

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. And to fully grasp this whole debate, we need to dig deeper into the all-Russian concept and see how it shaped the way people saw Gogol both then and now.

**[Male AI]:** Before we do that, though, I think we've got to address this dissenting voice—even within Russia. You mentioned Sergei Beliakov earlier.

**[Female AI]:** Ah, yes. Beliakov. He's a Russian critic who offers a really interesting take. He acknowledges Gogol's Ukrainian roots. Even calls him—and this is a great image—a "Ukrainian magician" who mastered the Russian language.

**[Male AI]:** A Ukrainian magician. That's a pretty powerful image.

**[Female AI]:** It is. But he still seems to place Gogol within the framework of Russian literature.

**[Male AI]:** So, he's saying Gogol was Ukrainian, but his work is ultimately Russian.

**[Female AI]:** That's the gist of it. He argues that Gogol's choice of language and his belief in Russia's eventual triumph make him a Russian writer, even if his roots are in Ukraine.

**[Male AI]:** It's like he's saying, "Yes, he was Ukrainian, but he chose to be Russian."

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. It's a tricky issue. Even when Gogol's Ukrainian background is recognized, it often ends up overshadowed by his use of Russian.

**[Male AI]:** But doesn't that clash with the argument that Ukrainian identity was still evolving during Gogol's time? Like, how could he choose something that wasn't fully formed yet?

**[Female AI]:** You're hitting on a key point there. The sources you've shared challenge that very notion. We can't impose modern definitions of national identity on someone like Gogol. We've got to look beyond language, delve into the intricacies of imperial culture, and explore the whole all-Russian idea that was so dominant in his lifetime.

**[Male AI]:** Okay, so let's do that. Let's really break down this all-Russian idea and its implications for understanding Gogol's identity.

**[Female AI]:** Let's do it. I think a good place to start is with how the all-Russian ideology appropriated Kyivan Rus'.

**[Male AI]:** Okay, Kyivan Rus'. Let's unpack that.

**[Female AI]:** So, the proponents of the all-Russian idea claimed Kyivan Rus' as the foundation of a singular Russian nation.

**[Male AI]:** Essentially erasing its distinct East Slavic character.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. Subsuming it under this overarching Russian narrative.

**[Male AI]:** So they're taking this ancient East Slavic state and retroactively labeling it Russian to bolster their claims of a unified Russian people. That's some serious historical revisionism.

**[Female AI]:** It is. And it highlights the power dynamics at play. The dominant Russian culture was actively trying to absorb Ukrainian identity, Ukrainian history, into its own narrative.

**[Male AI]:** And that creates this really complicated situation for Ukrainians. They're being told they're Russian, but at the same time, they're developing their own sense of national consciousness.

**[Female AI]:** Absolutely. A lot of tension there. And this directly impacted how Gogol was perceived.

**[Male AI]:** Both by Russians and Ukrainians, I imagine.

**[Female AI]:** Yes, exactly. On one hand, you have Russians embracing Gogol, claiming him as a master of Russian literature...

**[Male AI]:** But that embrace is based on a skewed understanding of his identity.

**[Female AI]:** Right. One that downplays his Ukrainian roots. It's like they're claiming him as one of their own while simultaneously erasing the very aspects of his identity that made him unique.

**[Male AI]:** It's a bit of a paradox, isn't it?

**[Female AI]:** It is. And that's where the sources you've provided offer a crucial counterpoint. They argue that Gogol's work, although written in Russian, actually challenges this all-Russian narrative. He celebrates Ukrainian distinctiveness and critiques aspects of Russian life, undermining this idea of monolithic Russian culture.

**[Male AI]:** That's so interesting. It's like there's this subtle pushback against the very forces that were trying to assimilate him.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. It's a really fascinating layer to Gogol's work. And to understand this pushback, we need to delve into Gogol's own life, the complexities of his Ukrainian identity. And that's where Gogol's personal identity becomes crucial. I mean, he was born and raised in Ukraine, steeped in Ukrainian culture. The sources argue that Ukrainianness wasn't just about language for Gogol.

**[Male AI]:** Right. It went deeper than that.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. Shared traditions, folklore, a sense of belonging to a distinct community. It was in his blood.

**[Male AI]:** So, we're talking about a deep cultural identity—something that transcended the spoken word.

**[Female AI]:** Absolutely. Language, while important, wasn't the sole definer of Ukrainian identity back then, especially during Gogol's time. And this is where the comparison with Taras Shevchenko gets really interesting.

**[Male AI]:** Oh, yeah. Shevchenko, the iconic Ukrainian poet. Right.

**[Female AI]:** Right. He's often seen as the embodiment of Ukrainian national identity...

**[Male AI]:** Even though he also wrote in Russian, at least for part of his career.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. And that highlights how fluid Ukrainian identity was in the 19th century. Shevchenko's later work championed the Ukrainian language and advocated for independence. But Gogol's use of Russian—well, that was the norm back then.

**[Male AI]:** So, judging Gogol by today's standards of, like, language-based nationalism, that's not really fair.

**[Female AI]:** It's anachronistic. Yeah. Like judging a fish by its ability to climb a tree. The sources make a good point. We can't impose those modern definitions on someone like Gogol. [7:57]

**[Male AI]:** Makes sense. You got to judge them within their own context.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. And despite this later emphasis on language—defining Ukrainian identity by language—many Ukrainian scholars like Hrushevs’kyi, Iaremchenko, and Doroshenko always defended Gogol’s Ukrainianness.

**[Male AI]:** They understood the historical context. They weren’t hung up on just the language he used.

**[Female AI]:** Precisely. And here’s where we start seeing the difference between Ilnytzkyj and Bojanowska, the two scholars you wanted to explore.

**[Male AI]:** Okay, getting to the heart of the matter.

**[Female AI]:** Right. Both challenge the simple view of Gogol as a purely Russian writer, but they interpret his Ukrainian identity differently.

**[Male AI]:** So where do they stand? Break it down for us.

**[Female AI]:** All right, so Ilnytzkyj, the author of the source you sent, makes a really bold claim. Gogol was, at his core, a Ukrainian nationalist, but he used the Russian language strategically to navigate this complex world of imperial culture.

**[Male AI]:** Strategic use of language. Interesting. So how does Ilnytzkyj support this idea?

**[Female AI]:** He points out that Gogol’s work reflects two sides of the same coin—you could say two sides of Ukrainian nationalism.

**[Male AI]:** Okay, two sides. I’m listening.

**[Female AI]:** On one hand, you see this idealization of Ukraine, especially in his early writings, but on the other hand, there’s this sharp critique of Russia, particularly in his later works.

**[Male AI]:** So, it’s not just what Gogol wrote, but how he wrote it. Like his satire of Russian life—that becomes a form of resistance.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. It’s him challenging the all-Russian narrative from within, poking holes in it with his wit and satire.

**[Male AI]:** Subverting expectation.

**[Female AI]:** Yes. And for Ilnytzkyj, this duality is key to understanding Gogol’s Ukrainian nationalism. It wasn’t about outright rejecting Russia, but about asserting a Ukrainian perspective, even while working within that Russian literary sphere.

**[Male AI]:** Operating within the system, but subtly pushing back against it.

**[Female AI]:** Precisely. Now, Bojanowska offers a more nuanced take. While she also rejects that purely Russian view of Gogol, she sees him as being between Ukrainian and Russian nationalism.

**[Male AI]:** Okay, so not as clear-cut for Bojanowska—more of a gray area.

**[Female AI]:** Right. She recognizes the strong Ukrainian elements in his early work—can't deny those. But his later writings, with their more Russian themes, suggest a shift toward a more Russian author persona in her view.

**[Male AI]:** So the [Russian—OSI] themes he focuses on become a key indicator of his national identity for Bojanowska.

**[Female AI]:** Yeah, it seems so. She argues that Gogol might have had multiple nationalist commitments, embracing both Ukrainian and Russian identities—just at different points in his career. She even described him as having this hyphenated identity, reflecting the complexities of living in that time within imperial culture.

**[Male AI]:** Hyphenated identity. So his identity wasn't static—it evolved over time, influenced by his personal life, his writing, the political climate, everything around him.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. But even with this hyphenated identity, Bojanowska stresses that Gogol's Ukrainian nationalism remains strong, especially in his satire of Russian society.

**[Male AI]:** So she sees that satire as a key piece of evidence.

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. She sees it as this deeper critique coming from his Ukrainian perspective, even as he explores Russian themes. But it's crucial to understand where Ilnytzkyj disagrees with this interpretation.

**[Male AI]:** All right, lay it on us. What's Ilnytzkyj's counterargument?

**[Female AI]:** He argues that those seemingly Russian themes in Gogol's later works are actually still expressions of his Ukrainian nationalism—just viewed through a different lens.

**[Male AI]:** So, not a shift in Gogol's identity, but a different way of expressing it.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. He says that Gogol's focus on those Russian themes—it wasn't assimilation; it was deliberate. A strategy to challenge that all-Russian narrative from within, using satire and social commentary to expose its flaws and contradictions.

**[Male AI]:** Wow, that's a really powerful argument. It reframes Gogol's entire body of work. It's not just about themes—it's about his intention, his purpose.

**[Female AI]:** Exactly. And it highlights a crucial point. The all-Russian idea wasn't just some passive concept. It was an active force shaping how Gogol was perceived, how his work was interpreted, and even how he interacted with the Russian literary world.

**[Male AI]:** So, we can't just look at Gogol in isolation. We have to consider the external pressures he faced—how that all-Russian narrative tried to mold him into something he wasn't.

**[Female AI]:** Absolutely. And that's where Ilnytskyj's analysis gets really interesting. He argues that Gogol's later struggles—his growing isolation and creative block—you know, those might be partly attributed to this pressure to conform, to fit into this Russian box that never quite fit him.

**[Male AI]:** That's almost tragic. This brilliant writer, so deeply connected to his Ukrainian roots, being forced to navigate a system that tried to erase those roots.

**[Female AI]:** It is. And it's why this debate about Gogol's national identity matters. It's not just an academic exercise. It's about recognizing the power dynamics at play within imperial culture—how these narratives, these grand ideas, can be used to marginalize, even erase, certain voices.

**[Male AI]:** It makes you wonder how different Gogol's life and work might have been if he hadn't faced those pressures. If he'd been free to express his Ukrainian identity without constraint.

**[Female AI]:** Absolutely. And it leads us to a crucial point. Understanding Gogol's Ukrainian identity isn't just about reclaiming his heritage. It's about understanding the impact of that all-Russian idea—how it warped perceptions of him and continues to influence how his work is read even today.

**[Male AI]:** That's powerful. It's not just about the past. It's about how those past narratives still affect us—how we understand literature, history, everything. Man, this has been a deep dive for real. We started off thinking, "Gogol: Russian writer; case closed." But now...

**[Female AI]:** Hmm.

**[Male AI]:** We're wrestling with this whole Ukrainian identity thing and the all-Russian idea looming over it all. [13:33]

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. It really highlights how history, well, it's rarely black and white...

**[Male AI]:** Nuance all the way down...

**[Female AI]:** Right. It's often shaped by whoever's in power, you know. And those narratives—they can bury the experiences of those who aren't.

**[Male AI]:** The voices get lost.



**[Female AI]:** Exactly.

**[Male AI]:** So, what does this mean for us, for anyone listening? We've explored two pretty different takes on Gogol's national identity: Ilnytzkyj's argument for a singular Ukrainian identity, expressed strategically through Russian, and Bojanowska's view of this hyphenated identity evolving under pressure.

**[Female AI]:** I think the takeaway here is Gogol's identity—like many historical figures—is complex, multi-layered. It resists these easy labels we love to slap on.

**[Male AI]:** No boxes for Gogol.

**[Female AI]:** Right. And both Ilnytzkyj and Bojanowska push us to look beyond those, to engage with the nuances of his life and work...

**[Male AI]:** ...to really grapple with it.

**[Female AI]:** Yeah. And I think the most important point is that all-Russian idea—with its insistence that Ukrainians are just Russians—has really skewed our understanding of Gogol.

**[Male AI]:** Big time. Like we're looking at him through a warped lens, one that downplays his Ukrainian heritage and pushes this narrative that was meant to erase that part of him.

**[Female AI]:** You said it.

**[Male AI]:** And it makes you think—how much of his work have we misinterpreted or even just missed completely because of that lens?

**[Female AI]:** Oh, that's a fantastic question. It makes you want to go back and reread him, you know, with fresh eyes. Look for those hints of Ukrainianness, those critiques of Russian society, those moments where he celebrates Ukrainian culture—the stuff that might have been overlooked before.

**[Male AI]:** All those hidden layers.

**[Female AI]:** Right. To see how he navigated that world, asserting his identity in this system that was trying to silence it.

**[Male AI]:** This deep dive—it's not just about Gogol. It's made me think about how narratives get built, how they shape our understanding of history, of who we are. And remember, folks, what we've talked about today—it's just a starting point. There's so much more to explore. If this has piqued your interest, again, check out Ilnytzkyj, Bojanowska, other scholars challenging the accepted narratives. There's a whole world out there.

**[Female AI]:** Fascinating stuff. Really.

**[Male AI]:** Huge. Thanks for joining us on this journey. We've dug deep, questioned what we thought we knew, and hopefully sparked that curiosity in you to keep exploring the amazing world of Nikolai Gogol, Ukrainian identity—all of it. Until next time, keep questioning, keep learning, keep diving deep.