Diminishing Ukraine: A Country's Internal Entropy during Times of Existential War

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Preliminary Observations

The world is saturated with chaos. However, chaos takes various forms. Some of these forms foster life in all its aspects, while others cultivate entropy and lead to death. Some open space for individual and collective creativity, expanding the boundaries of existence; others pit social forces against one another, creating social hell. Some sustain the pursuit of common wealth and create conditions where different individuals and groups might coexist; others compel a common dearth and fuel an eternal war of all against all. Moreover, the worldly chaos grows more complex because different forms of it are present in different places at different times: these forms shape cultures and traditions, yet they remain open to human influence – they can be transformed through deliberate effort and durable collective will, either enhancing life's possibilities or wiping them out entirely.

Considering this perspective, the question posed by *Ukrainian Forum* – "Has anything gone wrong in Ukraine?" – might appear pointless. If the world and its history are inherently chaotic, then there is no true right or wrong, correctness or goodness – these concepts simply have no ground.

And yet, this question is both valid and worth considering. How else can we understand the internal roots of the ongoing Ukrainian tragedy that has been unfolding for over a decade? The perspective embedded in the question is critically important. We are not concerned here with the external causes, whose importance is no less than that of internal factors in this tragedy. Rather, the question's intentionality directs us toward that part of the sources of the tragedy that stem from Ukraine's own internal specificities – the chaos in us – and that require clarification, understanding, and, possibly, treatment.

One more philosophical preliminary is required. When a significant event occurs, it gathers disparate elements of the world's historical chaos into a coherent whole, imposing a certain order and creating what we usually call "causes." Precisely so: the event defines its "causes," not the other way around. This is both the limitation and the importance of any analytical effort. On one hand, we can only see those origins that the event itself has chosen and points us to – or even commands us to see. On the other hand, within the dialogue between event and analyst, it becomes possible to discern far more than the event intends to reveal. This knowledge can assist therapeutic efforts to reduce harm and help overcome the effects of a tragedy that has come home to the lives of millions in Ukraine.

The Internal Sources of the Ukrainian Tragedy

From within, Ukraine's tragedy manifests itself as extreme polarization – not just the usual political disagreements characteristic of both healthy democracies and toxic autocracies, but something far more destructive: the development of a politically structured, institutionally embedded, and ontologically deepening void between fragments of what was once a cohesive network of people – the multitude – that constituted Ukraine's Third Republic in the early 1990s.[1]

1 On the division of Ukraine's political history into three periods or three "republics," see, for example: B. Lozhkin and V. Fedorin, *The Fourth Republic: Why Europe Needs Ukraine and Why Ukraine Needs Europe* (Kyiv: Novyi Druk, 2016); Y. Hrytsak, "The Third Ukraine: A Case of Civic Nationalism," *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 50, no. 4 (2024): 674-87; M. Minakov, "Balancing Coercion and Extortion: Change and Continuity in Ukrainian Statehood," *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie: Diritto, Istituzioni, Società (NAD-DIS)*, 7, no. 1 (2025): 85-98.

This fragmentation is not merely disagreement or competition over different visions of the commonwealth and the national future, which is genuine politics, or koinonia concerning the highest of common goods.[2] It is, in fact, the systematic dismantling of the very possibility of shared existence, of the political community itself. Where once there was the intricate yet interconnected fabric of society – though imperfect, contested, and chaotic – now yawns a carefully crafted and infinitely expanding emptiness that prevents these fragments from recognizing each other as part of a shared Ukrainian reality. I would call this polarizing and self-annihilating force the phenomenon of "diminishing Ukraine."

The phenomenon of "diminishing Ukraine" is sustained by two fundamental cleavages that run far deeper than the well-known cultural split between the eastern/bilingual and western/monolingual poles of Ukraine's globe or the more recent clash between pro-Russian and pro-European partisan orientations.[3] The first cleavage stems from the contradiction, rooted in Ukrainian political ontology itself, between the country and the state. Our chaos is partly organized around the inconsistency between Ukraine as a lively homeland (country), rich in regional particularities and local attachments, and Ukraine as a state apparatus demanding cultural uniformity and total allegiance to ideological authority.

The second key division emerges in the conflict between two incompatible forms of statehood based on Ukraine's power practices: the Leviathan, which maintains civic peace through strict hierarchical structures and a totalitarian social contract concerning a bitter common good, and the Behemoth, which generates perpetual civil war and destabilizes any stable political system through its ideal of a honied common harm. And the intermediate, less radical forms of statehood between these two extremes were unable to establish themselves.

These two fundamental divisions intersect and amplify one another, creating conditions in which ordinary political disagreements metastasize into internal existential conflict, now complicated by external existential war.

Ukrainian Leviathan and Behemoth vs. Country

Thomas Hobbes's stark vision of politics – formed in the turmoil of seventeenth-century British revolutionary upheaval at the start of Modernity – speaks with a disturbing immediacy to the historical phase that Ukraine and much of Eastern Europe entered in 2013. This was when the comfortable illusions of post-communist transition began to fall apart, also signaling that Modernity itself seemed to be ending. Hobbes's idea that the legitimate authority of the state exists in perpetual tension with the constant threat of returning to the state of nature – where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"[4] – captures precisely the existential stakes that arise as power institutions prove fragile, laws reveal their impotence, and social chaos spreads. The Hobbesian insight that Leviathan's sovereignty isn't a fixed fact but an ongoing achievement – constantly threatened by the forces of dissolution, as embodied by the figure of Behemoth – shows how quickly the apparent normalcy of stable statehood and relative civil peace could give way to a raw struggle for survival. The revolutionary events since 2013's Euromaidan, in this strange symmetry between Modernity's beginning and possible end, seem less like an interruption of progress and more like a return to politics in its most basic form: the fundamental question of who has the power to decide between life and death, order and chaos.

Unlike the Roman provinces of Southern and Western Europe, the lands of Eastern Europe established a more or less regular state presence only in the eighth or ninth centuries. The Dnipro-based

2 See Aristotle's *Politics* II.1.1261a18, III.1.1275b20.

3 Here, I accept and continue to develop the concept of "Little Ukraine," first formulated by Andrii Yermolaiev in 2015. See, e.g., А. Ермолаев, *Капли росы* (Киев: София, 2015).

4 T. Hobbes, Leviathan, ed. R. Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1651]), 207.

slave-trading enterprise of the Varangians evolved into the Rurikid dynastic polity of ancient Rus', which laid the foundation for a political culture distinctive to the peoples of Eastern Europe.[5] Here, the foreign origin of ruling groups – and of government as such – came to be seen as a legitimate source of political authority. This regional form of Leviathan rested on a hierarchical contract between foreign rulers and local subjects, with fundamentally different normative systems governing each category. In this arrangement, civil peace of the Hobbesian kind grew from a stark bargain: local communities would obey the foreign government provided they were permitted to maintain their traditional ways of life, while the rulers retained the right to employ radical forms of coercion and extortion. This coercion aimed to preserve the distinction between rulers and ruled without penetrating too deeply into local communal affairs, while the extortion functioned as systematic tribute – protection money that kept governing predators at a safe distance.

This Eastern European Leviathan evolved through successive stages over more than a millennium. Far from weakening this state form, the Mongol conquests, subsequent Tatar overlordship, Lithuanian expansion, and the Polish colonial project of the Lublin Union only reinforced its fundamental logic in Ukraine. Both the Russian empire and the Soviet Union were shaped decisively by this Leviathan model, adapting its core principle – legitimate foreign rule over autonomous local communities – to the demands of imperial expansion and ideological transformation. In this evolution, it was not only the specific form of Leviathan that shaped Ukraine's political culture, but also the strict division between state and country that this arrangement institutionalized.

Within this framework, the "state" refers to formal political structures, institutions, and elites that seek to maintain control over resources, people, and discourse – always retaining its character as a non-indigenous entity, an intruder from the hostile outside world. The "country," by contrast, encompasses the lived realities, traditions, and identities of Ukraine's culturally and regionally diverse population – multiple life-worlds, each with its own local traditions, cultures, and languages, existing in carefully negotiated autonomy from state power. It manifests in civil society, informal networks, and communities that resist or substitute the state's ideological impositions through everyday practices of evasion, accommodation, and quiet dissent. Where the state demands conformity and control, the country pursues survival and local autonomy. Yet the country itself remains fractured by incompatible regional memories that generate mutually exclusive political languages, preventing the emergence of shared civic identity or genuinely pluralistic discourse.[6]

Ukraine's chaos is more complex, however. In certain periods and regions of Ukraine, there have been instances of a completely different kind of statehood: Behemoth. Hobbes invoked this apocalyptic beast to symbolize a state on the verge of collapse, where legitimate authority collapses and society fragments into warring factions, making itself vulnerable to external political interference. Applied to the Ukrainian context, Behemoth represents a form of state formation that actively generates civic conflict rather than controlling it – a situation in which normal political order mechanisms fail, and society goes through a phase of self-destruction.

Behemothic episodes collapse the protective distance between state and country that characterizes the Eastern European Leviathan, resulting in periods of social chaos that paradoxically generate both greater freedom and heightened existential risk. In these moments, the barriers separating governing elites from local communities dissolve, throwing both into direct, often violent contact. The state ceases to function as an external arbiter and becomes instead a prize to be captured, fragmented, or destroyed by competing forces – both internal Ukrainian factions and external powers seeking to reimpose Leviathanic control.

5 Here I follow the theory of Oleksii Tolochko formulated in А. Толочко, *Очерки начальной Руси* (Киев: Лаурус, 2015).

6 For more on state-country division in Ukraine see: M. Minakov, "The Language of Dystopia: The Ideological Situation in Ukraine," *Russian Politics & Law* 49, no. 5 (2011): 43-54.

These external interventions, in collaboration with internal Ukrainian camps, generate entropic processes. Timothy Snyder referred to this recent form of entropy as the "Bloodlands" effect – areas where competing imperial ambitions and local forces collide, turning local populations into victims of existential conflicts that extend beyond their immediate interests and loyalties, as well as transforming the entire region into uninhabitable zones.

Ukraine's sporadic descents into *kozachchyna* and *haidamachchyna*, its wars for independence and *Ruina*, the marvelous creatively destructive 1990s, and the post-Euromaidan revolutionary interregnum all exemplify these Behemothic phases. Each period witnessed the breakdown of established political forms and the emergence of new, often ephemeral configurations of power – moments when ordinary citizens found themselves thrust into roles as political actors, when long-suppressed grievances erupted into open conflict, and when the very foundations of social order became subjects of violent contestation.

The alternation between these two forms of statehood – the distant, predatory Leviathan and the chaotic, self-destructive Behemoth – has created a political culture in which Ukrainians have rarely experienced stable, legitimate governance that serves their collective interests. Instead, they have learned to navigate between external domination and internal fragmentation, developing survival strategies that privilege local autonomy over national unity, personal networks over public institutions, and tactical accommodation over principled political engagement.

The Diminishing Ukraine

At the heart of diminishing Ukraine lies a perverse logic of common dearth – a systematic impoverishment of life-forms that stems not only from external aggressions, but also from the internal dynamics of both Leviathan and Behemoth as they devour the country they claim to govern and care for. This is not the ordinary political competition over scarce resources that characterizes normal democracies, nor even the predatory extraction typical of autocracies. It is something more fundamental: a structural commitment to mutual impoverishment that operates regardless of which political force holds power.

Both forms of statehood – whether the distant, alien Leviathan or the chaotic, fragmenting Behemoth – share a fatal characteristic: they consume the country's substance while generating nothing sustainable in return. The Leviathan treats Ukraine as a colonial territory to be exploited, maintaining power through the systematic weakening of local communities and their organic bonds of rhizomatic life-worlds. The Behemoth, conversely, feeds on conflict itself, requiring the constant multiplication of grievances and the escalation of mutual antagonisms. Neither form recognizes the country as something equal, or at least an object to be nurtured, developed, and served. Both see it as raw material for their own reproduction.

This logic of common dearth explains why Ukraine's political cycles[7] have consistently resulted in net loss – why each revolution, each change of regime, each moment of apparent progress has left the country poorer in human capital, social trust, and cultural richness than before. The state, in both its Leviathanic and Behemothic manifestations, has become a machine for converting the country's accumulated wealth – social, cultural, and material – into political energy that ultimately dissipates into nothingness.

The Ukrainian Behemoth operates according to a distinctive principle: it is not a single revolu-

7 On these cycles see: H.E. Hale, "Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *World Politics* 58, no. 1 (2005): 133-65; O. Huss and O. Bertelsen, "The Perpetual Cycle of Political Corruption in Ukraine and Post-revolutionary Attempts to Break through It," in O. Bertelsen, ed., *Revolution and War in Contemporary Ukraine: The Challenge of Change* (BoD-Books on Demand, 2016), 317-53; B. Madlovics and B. Magyar, "Ukrainian Regime Cycles and the Russian Invasion," *CEU DI Working Papers* 13 (2023), 1-74.

tionary force, but a multitude of warring minorities, each defined not by what it seeks to build but by whom it seeks to harm. When any of these minorities takes control of the state apparatus, its main goal is not only advancing its own agenda but also systematically damaging rival groups. This transforms governance into a negative-sum game of common dearth where victory is measured not by shared prosperity but by the successful humiliation and weakening of opponents.

What makes this particularly corrosive in the Ukrainian context is that these competing minorities, despite their indigenous origins, inevitably become internal foreigners once they assume power. The very act of capturing the state machinery alienates them from the organic communities they claim to represent. They must enforce their vision through the same mechanisms of distance and coercion that characterize foreign rule, thereby reproducing the Leviathanic logic even in moments of supposedly popular empowerment.

In the past three decades, the Behemoth has visited Ukraine repeatedly with devastating regularity. It emerged in 1990-1991, helping to secure independence through the dissolution of Soviet structures, only to retreat as the chaos of freedom proved unmanageable. It returned in 1993-94, creating the conditions that later enabled Kuchma's Leviathanic consolidation. The twenty-first century witnessed two major Behemothic eruptions in the form of the Orange Revolution (2004-05) and Euromaidan (2013-14), each promising democratic transformation but ultimately preparing the ground for new forms of autocratic control. Now, as Ukraine faces existential war, the Behemoth approaches the Kyiv hills once more, drawn by the scent of collapsing society and the opportunity to feast on the fragments of a disintegrating state apparatus.

The Ukrainian Leviathan embodies a more insidious principle: it presents itself as metaphysically – and often geographically – foreign as a source of its legitimacy rather than as a liability to be overcome. This is not the ordinary distance between rulers and ruled that characterizes all complex societies, but a deliberate cultivation of alienation as the foundation of political authority. The Leviathanic state in Ukraine does not merely govern from above; it governs from outside, positioning itself as the representative of transcendent principles that supersede local attachments and particularities.

In the three decades since independence, this Leviathanic impulse has been embodied by some periods during the presidencies of Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Yanukovych, Petro Poroshenko, and even Volodymyr Zelensky – each representing different ideological orientations but sharing a common dynamic that led them to govern Ukraine as if from beyond its borders. Each of these Leviathanic experiments has promised unity, stability, and civil peace under authoritarian rulership, but has delivered only the temporary suppression of Ukraine's inherent diversity. By cutting itself off from the country's actual life-worlds, the Leviathanic state becomes incapable of genuine governance, able only to impose order through increasingly coercive and extortive means that ultimately provoke new cycles of Behemothic resistance.

Kyiv occupies a unique and tragic position in this dynamic as a capital city that is simultaneously indigenous and foreign, native and alien to the country it claims to head. As the historical urban center, Kyiv possesses unquestionable indigenous credentials – it is Ukraine's most organic urban space, rooted in centuries of continuous settlement and cultural development. Yet, as the seat of state power since the Varangians, it has become the primary site of alienation, the place where members of the ruling groups learn to govern Ukraine as if it were a foreign land.

This duality manifests in Kyiv's role as both the launching pad for Behemothic takeovers and the administrative center where these revolutionary energies are inevitably channeled into Leviathanic structures. As an indigenous space, Kyiv serves as the natural gathering point for Ukraine's diverse multitude – the place where regional representatives come to compete and collaborate in shaping national policy. But as the seat of state power, it becomes the site where successful political forces learn to exercise dominance over the very organic communities that elevated them to power.

The city's architecture reflects this contradiction: the golden domes of St. Sophia's Cathedral, sym-

bols of organic spiritual authority rooted in local tradition, as well as local interpretations of the Byzantine and Polish Baroque influences, stand in uneasy tension with the governmental buildings in the style of the Russian imperial classicism and the Soviet constructivism that house institutions designed to impose uniform rule over Ukraine's diverse regions. Kyiv thus embodies the fundamental contradiction of the Ukrainian fate: the impossibility of governing a genuinely diverse country through institutions that require homogenization as the precondition for effective control.

The most damning evidence for the reality of diminishing Ukraine lies not only in abstract political analysis but also in the simple arithmetic of existential decline. In the constant revolutionary cycles that have defined Ukraine's Third Republic, the state apparatus has been continuously challenged and periodically overthrown. However, it was not the ruling groups that lost their interest – it was the country itself that emerged as the permanent loser. Each oscillation between the Behemoth and Leviathan phases has left Ukraine with fewer people, weaker social ties, and diminished ethnolingual, confessional, and cultural diversity.

The demographic statistics tell a stark story of the constant depopulation of Ukraine since the early 1990s. But the loss is not merely numerical – it is qualitative. Generations have become increasingly disconnected from one another, with each electoral cycle witnessing the emergence of new political movements that explicitly reject the experiences and wisdom of their predecessors. "Steal your babusya's passport" became an unofficial electoral motto of youngsters, capturing the systematic devaluation of intergenerational continuity that has characterized Ukrainian political life.

The country's ethnolinguistic and confessional diversity – once a source of cultural richness – has been steadily diminished through emigration, assimilation, and the pressures toward homogenization. The fragments of Ukraine's multitude, rather than learning to coexist within a genuinely pluralistic framework, have drifted further apart, separated by an ever-widening void of mutual incomprehension and ressentiment.

This is diminishing Ukraine in its most literal sense: a country that grows smaller and emptier with each passing political cycle, not merely in population but in the diversity of life forms – human and animal, cultural and natural – that it sustains. The variety of choices available to its citizens in matters of knowledge and faith, speech and silence, continues to contract. It is as if someone has inscribed on St. Sophia's walls the graffiti of divine judgment: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN – weighed in the balance and found wanting, numbered and finished, divided and given away.

The Therapeutic Impossibility: Between the Cherry Orchard and the Bloodlands

These reflections, I believe, provide an answer to the question of what went wrong in Ukraine. The tragedy lies not in any single political mistake or historical accident, but in the structural impossibility of sustaining a genuine political community within the oscillating cycle of Leviathan and Behemoth that has defined Eastern European statehoods for over a millennium. Ukraine has been caught in a fatal dialectic: the alien Leviathan that governs from outside while systematically weakening local life-worlds, and the chaotic Behemoth that promises liberation but delivers only fragmentation and mutual harm. Both forms of state power treat Ukraine not as a living community to be nurtured, but as raw material for their own reproduction. The result has been the progressive diminishment of everything that makes life worth living – human connections, cultural diversity, intergenerational continuity, and the basic possibility of shared existence. What went wrong was not a deviation from some proper path, but the very logic of Ukraine's long-term political development itself.

Yet knowing what went wrong does not automatically reveal the path forward. As an ontological anarchist, I envision the possibility of something radically different: the rebirth of the Ukrainian rhizome through a minimalist state, robust constitutional democracy, and genuinely autonomous

self-governance. This would mean resurrecting the organic networks of local life that both Leviathan and Behemoth have systematically destroyed, creating space for Ukraine's diverse communities to flourish without the mediation of alienating state power. In essence, it would require replanting Taras Shevchenko's Cherry Orchard – that symbol of rooted, flourishing community life whose destruction Anton Chekhov so poignantly registered at the dawn of the twentieth century. Such a Ukraine would embrace its multiplicity rather than demanding homogenization, would govern through genuine consensus rather than coercion, and would treat political power as a tool for nurturing life rather than controlling it.

But I remain deeply uncertain whether such therapeutic renewal is possible, or even appropriate, for a continent now plunged into a new era of international warfare. The forms of worldly chaos that currently grip Eastern Europe seem merciless toward any attempt to cultivate the delicate conditions necessary for organic political life. The Bloodlands did not finish in the twentieth century; they are recurring nowadays, creating an environment where survival itself requires the very forms of state mobilization and social militarization that preclude the gentle work of community rebuilding. Perhaps the dream of the Ukrainian rhizome is simply incompatible with the existential realities of our historical moment. In this recognition lies my deepest pessimism: that life, in any form worthy of the name, may not spring again in these tortured lands for the foreseeable future. The diminishing Ukraine may continue to diminish until nothing remains but the memory of what might have been – and the bitter knowledge of what went wrong.