Can Ukraine Escape Pluralism by Default?

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Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has suffered from significant levels of corruption, stalemate, and failed efforts at reform. In the 1990s, Ukraine was seen as one of the most corrupt countries in the world,[1] plagued with hyperinflation and stalled reforms.[2] During that time, it experienced one of the lowest growth rates in all of Eastern Europe. Such dysfunction was due in part to weak institutions as well as regional divisions and a strong communist party in the East that consistently blocked reforms.

Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, there was a distinctive upside to such dysfunction. Weak institutions and regional divisions fostered democratic pluralism in Ukraine. Under conditions of what I call *pluralism by default*, leaders of Ukraine lacked the capacity to impose authoritarian rule: they were unable to keep allies in line, manipulate the electoral process, starve opponents of resources, or violently suppress opposition challenges. In the 1990s and 2000s, divisions between East and West also facilitated pluralism by providing mobilizational appeals to each side when it was out of power. To an important extent, popular mobilization in the 1990s and early twenty-first century was driven less by a robust civil society and more by the regional divide.

Yet, the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions of Ukraine dramatically altered the political landscape in ways that would seem to undermine pluralism by default and weaken the earlier sources of Ukrainian pluralism. First, the invasion significantly reduced regional divisions by taking numerous ethnic Russians out of the equation and weakening Russophile sentiment in the rest of the country. The invasions have also strengthened institutions – generating a substantially stronger military. The combination of greater Ukrainian unity, more powerful state institutions, and external threat would seem to increase dangers of authoritarianism in Ukraine. But so far there is only mixed evidence that democracy is in grave danger. While elections have been delayed due to the war, opposition remains active, and society has demonstrated the capacity to push back against Zelensky's efforts to manipulate power.

Pluralism by Default in Ukraine 1991-2022

In its first decades of independence, Ukraine experienced significant levels of democracy and pluralism: five turnovers in the country's top leadership (four electoral),[3] a consistently lively independent media, and repeated mass movements for political change. In 1990, 1994, 2004, and 2014, mass mobilization contributed to either immediate changes in national leadership (1990, 2004, 2014) or early elections and changes in leadership (1994).

Such pluralism is surprising. Massive rents from an extensive gas transit network gave incumbents the resources to buy off potential enemies and monopolize political control.[4] Simultaneously, "a profound disregard for the rule of law" and a "weak and politicized criminal justice system" made it possible for leaders to bring criminal charges against their adversaries.[5] Ukraine also emerged from

1 https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/1998 In 1998, Ukraine was one of the top 20 percent most corrupt countries in the world according to Transparency International.

2 J.S. Hellman, "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions," *World Politics* 50, no. 2 (1998): 203–34.

3 Elections resulted in a change of national leadership in 1994 (Kravchuk to Kuchma), 2004 (Kuchma to Yushchenko), 2010 (Yushchenko to Yanukovych), and 2019 (Poroshenko to Zelensky). In 2014, change in leadership occurred due to President Yanukovych's decision to leave the country after which Petro Poroshenko was elected President.

4 Balmaceda, Margarita. 2013. *The Politics of Energy Dependency: Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp.93-152.

5 Ryabinska, Natalya. 2011. "Media: The Media Market and Media Ownership in Post-Communist Ukraine Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism." *Problems of Post-Communism* 58, No. 6 (November/December)p. 5; http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2010

the Soviet era with a relatively weak civil society and opposition that confronted a "fundamental imbalance in raw political power."[6]

So where did democracy come from? As I have argued elsewhere, Ukrainian pluralism emerged in large part from incumbent weakness and regional divisions.[7] Repeated turnovers came about less because the country has had a particularly large number of died-in-the-wool democrats[8] or a particularly strong civil society, and more because oligarchs and ex-nomenklatura were highly divided and lacked the necessary state or party organization to centralize political control. Their mutual distrust was too high to allow the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Activists and protesters on the ground were central. But their unity and passion generally derived less from shared democratic values and more from commitment to competing and polarized conceptions of the nation.

In the first place, state weakness and the lack of robust ruling parties undermined efforts to use force against political opponents and meant that former allies of the president often defected into opposition – facilitating political pluralism. For one, the coercive apparatus was quite weak. Ukraine's military and coercive apparatus in the early 1990s had little discipline and suffered from persistent wage arrears.[9] Many SBU (former KGB) officers maintained "unbroken connections" to Moscow, which was thought to retain "significant influence" over security forces in Ukraine – thus undermining Kyiv's central control.[10] Simultaneously, fiscal crisis and institutional disarray severely weakened central control over state enterprises and local governments.

Ruling parties were also weak. Since independence, only a single president – Viktor Yanukovych (2010-14) – has been able to draw on a cohesive and well-organized party.[11] For example, Ukraine's first president, Leonid Kravchuk, came to power in part by abandoning the communist party, which moved into opposition in the early 1990s. The president was instead backed by a loose, regionally diverse and non-ideological "party of power" – or network of opportunistic elites that had no formal organization and was held together solely by self-preservation and "the idea of maintaining power."[12] Although many of the *people* remained the same from the Soviet era, the hierarchical *organization* of the elite had totally disappeared. Government functionaries, like Yevhenii Marchuk, Kravchuk's head of security, functioned as loosely knit "free agents."[13] Subsequently, presidents Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Yushchenko, and Petro Poroshenko also lacked strong parties.[14]

State and party weakness fostered pluralism. For one, incumbent weakness undermined efforts to clamp down on opposition and assert authoritarian control. Thus, as Kravchuk tells us in his memoirs, when in early January 1994 he ordered the ministries of security, interior, defense, and border guards to suppress parliament and delay the elections, they simply refused. [15] The security services were underfunded and demoralized; cabinet officials had no organizational or partisan ties to Kravchuk and

6 Kubicek, Paul. 2000. *Unbroken Ties: The State, Interest Associations, and Corporatism in Post-Soviet Ukraine.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p. 618.

7 Lucan Way, *Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics* (Johns Hopkins 2015)

8 Mark Beissinger, 2013. "The Semblance of Democratic Revolution: Coalitions in Ukraine's Orange Revolution." *American Political Science Review* 107 (August): 581–82.

9 Anderson, Julie, and Joseph Albini. 1999. "Ukraine's SBU and the New Oligarchy." *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 12, No. 3, p. 288); *Nezavisimost'* (11 August 1993: 3).

10 Anderson, Julie, and Joseph Albini. 1999. "Ukraine's SBU and the New Oligarchy." *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 12, No. 3, pp. 286, 285.

11 See Way *Pluralism by Default*, chapter 3.

12 Whitmore, Sarah. 2004. State Building in Ukraine: The Ukrainian Parliament, 1990-2003. London: RoutledgeCurzon, p. 32; Holovaty, Serhiy. 1993. "Ukraine: a View from Within." *Journal of Democracy* 4, No. 3: 110-13, p. 112.

13 Bondarenko, Kost'. "Evgenii Marchuk: zhizneopisanie kandidata v ukrainskie De Golli. Chast' vtoraia." *ForUM,* 9 September 2004

14 In contrast to other presidents, Yanukovych came to power in 2010 as the first "party president" with a prime minister, Mykola Azarov, from the same party backed by powerful, relatively unified and wealthy regional interests.

15 These events are described in detail in Kravchuk's memoirs (Kravchuk, Leonid. 2002. Maemo te, shcho maemo: Spohady i rozdumy. Kyiv, Ukraine: Stolittia, pp. 227-228).

thus little reason to take any risks to keep him in power. As a result, Kravchuk was forced to go ahead with elections in 1994 that he lost. A similar set of events occurred a quarter century later – in 2018 – when, following a Russian naval attack, President Poroshenko declared martial law, which would have postponed upcoming presidential elections. Due in part to opposition from his own allies, however, he was forced to amend the law and hold the elections as scheduled. He was then soundly defeated by a political outsider, Volodymyr Zelensky. Furthermore, party weakness undermined efforts to consolidate power by encouraging elite defection. Thus, presidents Kravchuk, Kuchma, and Yushchenko were all challenged by former allies (Yuliia Tymoshenko in the case of Yushchenko) or subordinates (Kuchma in the case of Kravchuk and Yushchenko in the case of Kuchma).

Regional cleavages also provided an important source of pluralism. Based on key historical and ethnolinguistic differences, Ukraine until at least 2014 could roughly be separated into three separate regions – West, Center, and East – that encompassed distinct blocs of political attitudes and became a highly attractive political resource for politicians and activists seeking to mobilize support. Surveys in the 1990s and 2000s identified significant cultural differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine. Western Ukrainians celebrated different holidays, and expressed greater support for the European Union and NATO and less support for Russia and the CIS than did their counterparts in the East.[16] Finally, for many years Central Ukraine was the country's "swing" region. Under Russian domination since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Central Ukraine lacked the history of nationalist mobilization found in Galicia but was more dominated by Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians than Eastern and Southern Ukraine.

The question of regional cleavages is highly controversial within Ukrainian studies because they have been used by Russian officials and other hostile forces to make the claim that Ukraine is not "real" (as if there *is* something called a "real" nation). While certainly not immutable, the divide dominated in the first decades of Ukrainian independence because it provided politicians with a relatively easy way to mobilize supporters that leaders found difficult to ignore. Indeed, the most enduring post-Soviet Ukrainian parties were built upon strongly polarized regional bases – including the Ukrainophile *Rukh* and the Russophile Communist Party and Party of Regions. Few politicians gained power without choosing sides – although some, such as Kuchma in the late 1990s, *switched* sides. In the end, national differences helped generate some of the most regionally polarized elections in the world. Thus in 2010, Viktor Yanukovych won 77 percent of the vote in the East – compared to 8 percent in Galicia and 16 percent in the West as a whole.[17] The electorate was similarly polarized in 1994 and 2004. By way of contrast, in the United States, often seen as highly divided, no major candidate won less than 30 percent in any state in the 2008 Presidential elections.

Regional divisions fostered pluralism by helping to mobilize voters and protesters against incumbent power. Until Russia's full-scale invasion, power regularly changed hands between politicians with bases of support in either Russophile or Ukrainophile populations. Thus in 1994, the Russophile challenger Kuchma defeated the Ukrainophile incumbent Kravchuk; in 2004, the Ukrainophile Yushchenko defeated Kuchma's chosen Russophile successor, Yanukovych; and in 2010, Yanukovych defeated Yushchenko. Finally, while regional divisions were weaker in 2019, the challenger (Zelensky) had greater support in the East than did the incumbent Poroshenko whose support was greatest in the west.

Regional identities also fostered mass mobilization. In 1994, Eastern Ukrainian miners mobilized against Kravchuk, forcing an early election and bringing down his government in 1993-94. By contrast, Ukrainophile populations spearheaded efforts to overthrow Yanukovych in both 2004 and 2014.

16 Hesli, Vicki. 1995. "Public Support for the Devolution of Power in Ukraine: Regional Patterns." Europe-Asia Studies 47, No. 1 p. 106); Khmelko, Valeri, and Andrew Wilson. 1998. "Regionalism and Ethnic and Regional Cleavages in Ukraine." In Taras Kuzio, ed. *Contemporary Ukraine*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, pp. 69-70.

17 Calculated from cvk.com.ua.

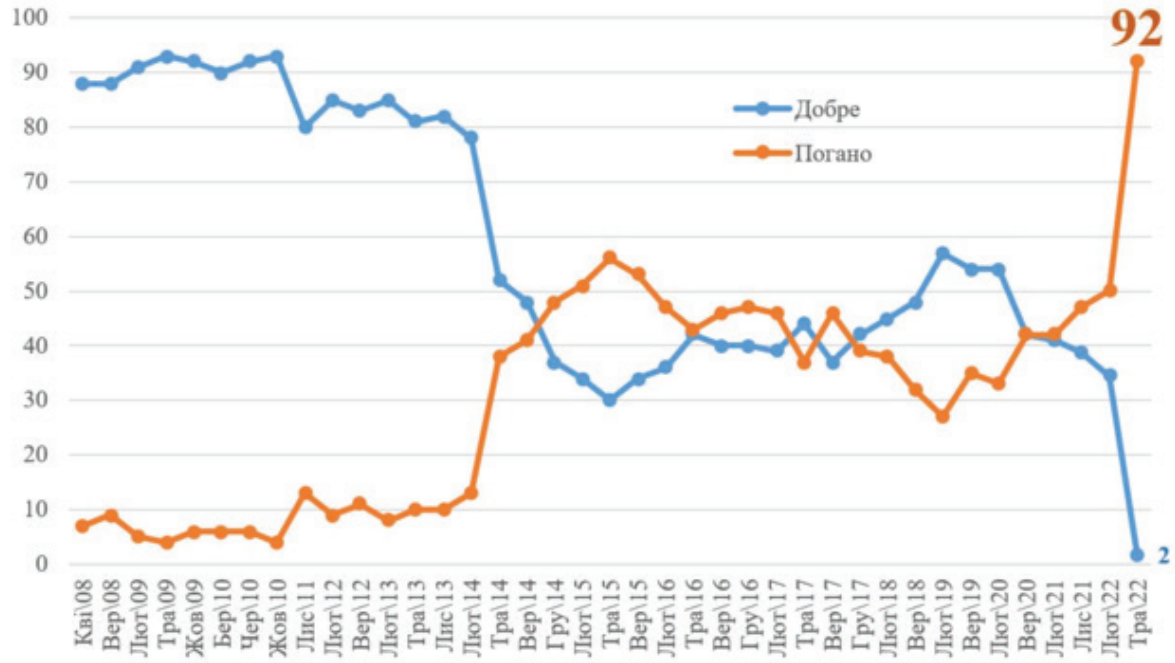
First, while survey research suggests that pro-Yushchenko demonstrators in 2004 possessed "weak commitment to democratic ends,"[18] those protesting overwhelmingly stated that they "wanted to see Ukraine as Ukrainian rather than as an appendage of Russia."[19] Speaking Ukrainian increased the odds of demonstrating by 382 percent.[20] Regional identities were also important in the 2013-14 Euromaidan protests. Across the country, a disproportionate share of anti-government protests was concentrated in Western Ukraine.[21] Within Kyiv, an overwhelming share of protesters were from Western or Central Ukraine.[22]

Thus, in the first decades of independence Ukrainian pluralism was bolstered to an important extent by authoritarian weakness and regional divisions.

After Invasion

The 2014 Russian seizure of Crimea and especially the 2022 full-scale invasion dramatically altered the Ukrainian political landscape – potentially undermining key sources of pluralism in the country. For one, the invasions reduced the power of Russophile forces that helped create an evenly balanced electorate. The separation of Crimea and the Donbas resulted in the departure of a highly Russophile 20 percent of Ukraine's electorate. More broadly, the invasions dramatically reduced public support – in both East and West – for Russophile political forces. As we can see in the figure below from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, Ukrainian attitudes toward Russia declined dramatically after the seizure of Crimea – falling from about 75 percent support of Russia in February 2014 to less than 40 percent support in December of that year. After the full-scale invasion of 2022, support dropped to below five percent.

Attitude of Ukrainians towards Russia, April 2008 to May 2022 (blue=good; orange=bad)[23]



18 Mark Beissinger, "The Semblance of Democratic Revolution: Coalitions in Ukraine's Orange Revolution." *American Political Science Review* 107 (August), pp. 575, 58).

19 Taras Kuzio 2010. "Nationalism, Identity and Civil Society in Ukraine: Understanding the Orange Revolution." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, No. 3 (September), p. 292.

20 Lucan Way 2011. "National Identity and Authoritarianism: Belarus and Ukraine Compared." In Paul D'Anieri, ed. *Social Mobilization in Ukraine*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

21 "Статистика протестних подій Майдану: учасники, географія, насильство" (http://www.cedos.org.ua).

22 "Річниця Майдану – опитування громадської та експертної думки" (dif.org.ua).

23 See https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1112&page=1

On the one hand, this shift in support for Russia might be considered a good thing – insofar as it eliminates support for Russophile political forces that were often highly authoritarian. At the same time, greater national unity makes Ukraine more susceptible to traditional nationalism that has often facilitated authoritarianism – especially in the context of war. In the country's first decades, traditional appeals to patriotism often divided the country and thus were not useful in garnering public support for autocrats. However, a more unified Ukrainian identity has arguably opened the way for Ukrainian leaders to utilize nationalism to unify the population around a common threat, discourage opposition, and justify repression.

Second, the Russian invasion resulted in a more effective state. For one, anti-corruption initiatives that began after the 2014 invasion – together with Ukraine's need to appeal to Western donors for its survival – has resulted in a noticeable decline in corruption.[24] While corruption remains an important issue, the country no longer ranks among the most corrupt countries in the world as it did in the 1990s.[25] In addition, the armed forces have become significantly more effective. In the early 2010s, the military was so weak that it was unable to respond to Russia's takeover of Crimea. Three years after the full-scale invasion, however, the Ukrainian military had become "by far Europe's biggest and most effective fighting force" consisting of "battle-hardened" troops.[26] In other countries – such as Armenia – military veterans have been an important source of authoritarian repression. Combined with increased national unity, and existential threats to national survival, such increased capacity would seem to create a serious danger to Ukrainian democracy.

So where does Ukrainian democracy stand after such profound shifts in the political context? On the one hand, the war has created serious problems for democracy. Ukraine has been under martial law for more than three years and has been forced to delay presidential elections due to the war.[27] In addition, media freedom has suffered. After the full scale invasion, three opposition-oriented TV stations (Espresso TV, Channel 5, and Direct) were taken off main terrestrial TV network[28] because they refused to join "United News" – an effort to unite all news programs into a single 24-hour news program.[29]

At the same time, important elements of pluralism remain. All three opposition channels continue to operate via satellite and online, and stories of corruption and criticism of Zelensky abound in the media. Furthermore, while numerous pro-Russian political forces were banned after the full-scale invasion, a number of opposition parties continue to operate openly – including European Solidarity, headed by Zelensky's rival Petro Poroshenko, Batkivshchyna, and Holos. Opposition politicians openly criticize the president. Finally, the ruling party itself is highly fragmented. A significant number have gone into open opposition and many others frequently fail to show up to vote. As a result, Zelensky's party often requires and seeks out opposition support to pass legislation.[30]

Even in the context of war, mass protest remains as before a factor in Ukrainian politics. In July 2025, when government officials raided the offices of the National Anticorruption Bureau and sought to strip its independent authority, thousands of activists took to the streets in Kyiv. Polls suggested that an overwhelming share of the population supported the protests.[31] Thus, even though Ukraine was

24 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/05/oecd-integrity-and-anti-corruption-review-of-ukraine_4d9e5ab7.html

25 In 1998, Ukraine ranked among the top 20 percent of the most corrupt countries in world according to Transparency International. Now it is roughly in the middle of the pack among countries covered by Transparency International.

26 https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-growing-military-strength-is-an-underrated-factor-in-peace-talks/

27 https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-ukraines-elections-can-wait/

28 https://rsf.org/en/three-ukrainian-tv-news-channels-barred-digital-video-broadcasting-past-year

29 https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/ukraines-information-warriors/

30 https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/work-in-progress.pdf pp. 19-20.

31 https://gradus.app/uk/open-reports/69-surveyed-ukrainians-support-protests/

under fierce attack from Russia, President Volodymyr Zelensky was forced to reverse course. Furthermore, while a significant majority of Ukrainians say they approve of Zelensky, just a quarter believe that he should remain in office after the war.[32]

Thus, as expected, Ukraine's changed political landscape and war with Russia have partly undermined the country's democracy. However, pluralism persists. Despite facing a far more existential external threat than does its eastern neighbor, the Ukrainian political system does not resemble anything close to the dictatorship in Russia. Popular opinion and civil society remain important checks on government power. The invasion and increased national unity have not undermined the Ukrainian population's readiness to oppose those in power.

32 https://kyivindependent.com/around-25-of-ukrainians-wants-zelensky-to-remain-president-after-war-poll-shows/