The Broken Mirror of the World in Crisis

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Which Ukraine?

When we ask how Ukraine arrived at its present catastrophe, the first question should be: *which* Ukraine are we talking about?[1] The war has been lived through in radically different ways. For some Ukrainians, it has meant death, dispossession, exile. For others, it has meant career breakthroughs, political projects suddenly feasible, or access to new resources and sources of income. Ukraine is not and has never been a single subject, but a mosaic of diverse and diverging fates.

The war economy has generated its share of predators: middlemen in weapons supply and humanitarian aid, conscription officers pocketing bribes, corrupt rent-seekers at the highest level of the government. But these are only among the most obscene forms of profiteering. On both sides of the front, new business and career opportunities have been seized. Some of those who stayed in occupied territories filled the posts vacated by those who fled. Figures like Viktor Medvedchuk, losing fortunes in Ukraine, could have found fresh stakes in Russian real estate, Donbas metallurgy, Siberian oil (Titov, 2023). At the same time, many have climbed up in ways more legitimate for the Western elites: into politics, into public visibility, into cultural and academic prominence at home and abroad. To be a "Ukrainian voice" in Western media and institutions has itself become a mode of career ascension (Ishchenko, 2022a), playing a role not unlike that of Cuban, Venezuelan, or Iranian "voices," typically drawn from privileged groups.

Paradoxically, even amidst devastation, an optimistic discourse has taken hold among influential segments of both the Ukrainian and Western public. Prominent commentators hailed wartime Ukraine as more democratic than ever and even economically buoyant (Cooper, 2024; Gumenyuk, 2022; Onuch & Way, 2024). Somehow they look past the fact that most of the state budget had become entirely dependent on Western funds, and that the suppression of opposition and dissent, however unsurprising in wartime, is a problem for democracy, not a sign of its vitality. As late as 2025, some exalted Western leftists reported that Ukraine's Armed Forces relied "on a popular war effort, with the army made up of ordinary workers, trade unionists, students, LGBTQ people, and volunteers fighting for their communities" (Lanson & Le Tréhondat, 2025), while remaining conspicuously blind to the realities of "busification" (brutally forced conscription on the streets), the mass scale of draft evasion, and record levels of desertion. Ironically, in the 1930s many prominent Western leftist intellectuals made pilgrimages to Stalin's USSR, celebrating the revolution's achievements while averting their eyes from famine and terror (Furet, 2000). Their present-day successors, applauding wartime Ukraine, cannot even plead the excuse of restricted access. The realities of Ukraine's economy, state, society, and army have been extensively documented and freely available online. What is missing is not information but the willingness to see: a blindness no longer imposed by censorship, but chosen in the name of "solidarity" – solidarity with those who fit their ideological fantasies rather than those who suffer the most.

Many Ukrainian (and not only) intellectuals, meanwhile, greeted the war as an epochal chance for "derussification" and "decolonization," the long-awaited moment to recast Ukraine in their own image and likeness. As one Ukrainian writer exulted in the essay "The country of our dream":

> Day by day, we realize dreams we had for years… We pay a horrible price, but in exchange we receive things once thought utopian – impossible to implement in practice… For example, the derussification of cities and public space (Liubka, 2022).

1 The work on this article was supported by the Einstein Foundation.

For many in these circles, the war presented not a catastrophe but an unprecedented opportunity. As polemicist Mykhailo Dubynianskyi put it, such visions are possible only because "someone else pays the horrible price" (Dubynianskyi, 2023) – the millions who lost their lives, their health, their close ones, or their homes.

Nor is this dynamic confined to elites. Many refugees have found opportunities abroad, especially for their children. Landlords in Ukrainian cities discovered windfalls in letting apartments to displaced families. Local economies of survival and profit have grown amid the ruins. The war has crushed lives, but also opened avenues that would otherwise never have appeared.

Ukraine today is like a shattered prism: each fragment refracts the same catastrophe into a different color. Some see blood and ruin; others glimpse opportunity. For some, the opening of peace negotiations offered a space for hope; for others, it unleashed hysterical denunciations of capitulation. Some have been in the army for several years and cannot wait for demobilization. Some hide from or resist busification. Some would rather kill a conscription officer than go to the front line. The war has only posed the question more sharply than ever: *who will benefit, and who will pay the highest price*?

The answer to this question is not decided by the people together in any act of collective "self-determination." The war has not only produced diverging interests among Ukrainians but has deepened the inequality in their political capacity to pursue those interests. Those empowered by the war have typically been the more privileged, affluent, educated, organized, already aligned with and connected to elites in Ukraine and the West. Those marginalized by it have typically been the subaltern, the poorer, the less educated, and atomized. They were already the least equipped to defend their interests before the war, and are even less so now.

It was not supposed to end this way. Many, such as some of the authors cited above, saw the war as the culmination of a long historical process of national consolidation: not fragmentation and dispersal, but the forging of a unity that would finally settle, once and for all, the questions of what Ukraine is and who Ukrainians are in relation to Russia, to the West, to the rest of the world. The war was expected to fix some fundamental common interests of a nation that had spent decades, or even a century, failing to agree on what those interests were. Beyond national consolidation, it was anticipated to complete Ukraine's full integration into the international order organized by Western elites – into "civilization" itself – joining the club of the most developed and rich nations and leaving behind what the ideologues and beneficiaries of that order presented as the burdensome legacy of the Soviet Union: that supposedly dead-end road of suffering and delusion, first enforced by bloodthirsty fanatics and later mismanaged by hypocritical bureaucrats. Furthermore, the fighting and winning Ukraine was to serve as a shield for the "democratic world" against the authoritarian threat, and in doing so to reaffirm the whole post-1989 narrative of liberal capitalism's triumph, supplying, both at home and internationally, a much-needed injection of legitimacy to Western elites who claimed to stand on the right side of history. The war, in short, was expected not only to complete Ukraine's nation-building but to breathe new life into Western, above all U.S., global leadership. The war was supposed to unite not merely a nation but "civilization," rallying the "free world" around its own highest self-image at the moment of its greatest test.

As the chasm between expectations and reality becomes impossible to ignore, so too grows the need to explain it. Some will simply dress defeat as victory through increasingly obvious mental gymnastics ("maintaining Ukraine's independence" by becoming dependent on foreign aid as never before, and so on). Others will seek self-justification, either through a blame game about mistakes and failures or even "betrayal" – by Trump's cynicism, Ukrainian elites' incompetence and corruption, European leaders' vacillation, the Russian opposition's impotence – or by pointing to "objective circumstances" that supposedly predetermined the disastrous outcome, for example, the sheer balance of forces that favored Vladimir Putin and other challengers of the U.S.-led order, without asking how that imbalance came to exist, or why the former proved so much more capable of mobilizing their resources for the

fight than the latter.

But there is also a growing demand to question the dominant narratives themselves – about Ukraine and Russia, about the Soviet Union and post-Soviet transformations, about the West and its global role – that shaped the failed expectations of the entire period since the end of the Cold War for the nation, for the region, and for the world. These ideological narratives obfuscated political processes bound up with interests that concerned us all – processes to which we all contributed in different ways, through individual and collective action, but which disproportionately served the narrow interests of the few, and which propelled events in precisely the opposite direction from the promises sold to so many, not least in Ukraine. It is the ruthless criticism of these bankrupt paradigms and the development of alternatives that can better explain what has been happening and help us understand what follows – that is becoming ever more urgent, and to which this essay seeks to contribute.

The starting point is not the unfulfilled promise of unity and integration but the factual reality of prolonged national, regional, and global disintegration. The task is to outline an alternative comprehensive narrative about Ukraine and the post-Soviet countries in general, not as an anomaly, but as the current norm – and even more so as the vanguard of the world in crisis. The argument advanced here is that Ukraine's catastrophe is fundamentally a product and a factor of a dual crisis: the crisis of revolution and the crisis of hegemony. On one side, the degeneration of the Soviet revolution, which built modern Ukraine, and its centrifugal disintegration, which defined the main lines of the post-Soviet class conflict that tore Ukraine apart. On the other, the parallel and also interconnected decay of the US-centered international order that the prevailing part of Ukraine's elites fatally staked the nation's future upon. Its appeal rested on the hegemonic project of "democratic capitalism" – one that promised, and partially delivered (foremost in the post-WWII West), social and political integration for the majority and upward mobility for the "deserving," and whose waning credibility has defined the dominant narrative of the post-Cold War era. Through the interconnection of these two crises – of bourgeois hegemony and of the social revolution that was supposed to overcome it but instead made it possible – Ukrainians were among the crucial agents in both the creation and the destruction of that order. Ironically and tragically, the more urgently they tried to enter it – dismantling the legacy of the very revolution that had profoundly shaped the "civilization" they sought to join – the faster that order itself was disintegrating. Ukraine's catastrophe both reflected the world crisis and accelerated it.

To understand how we arrived here, and what may lie ahead, we must begin where modern Ukraine itself began – with the revolution.

The Ukraine the Revolution Built

The heated debates about the Soviet Union were never only about the sustainability, effectiveness, progressiveness, or repressiveness of its order. They always carried an explicit or implicit comparison with capitalism – the system the Soviet revolution sought to supplant. And just as perceptions of the Soviet Union shifted across decades, with the "winner" of the comparison alternating from one period to another, so too did the relative standing of capitalism as its rival. The consequences of the Soviet revolution were perceived in radically different ways: in the 1920s, amid escalating political crisis across Europe and the rise of fascist counterrevolution; in the 1950s, at the peak of Soviet international might and prestige; in the 1990s, after the Soviet collapse, amid widespread doubt about whether all the labor, suffering, and blood had been in vain; and again today in the 2020s, with the ever more apparent crisis of the global order, which was supposed to be the triumph of capitalism. Interpretations of the Soviet revolution shifted because the world itself changed along with the revolution that once helped to bring it about, and whose legacies continue to shape it still.

From the vantage point of the 1990s "end of history," the contest appeared resolved once and for all: liberal democracy would supplant one-party rule; prosperity would flow from efficient markets

replacing a dysfunctional planned economy; sovereign nation-states would emerge from Moscow's shadow and claim a decent place in the "civilized world." Of course, few imagined this could be achieved overnight, and so each failure was reclassified and excused. If liberal institutions did not yield democracy, this was attributed not to their inherent flaws and contradictions, but to the claim that they remained merely formal "façades" over entrenched informal authoritarianism. If capitalism brought poverty and not prosperity, this was because it was not "proper" but "crony" capitalism. If post-Soviet nationalism led not to stronger states but to demodernizing ethnic primordialism, this was framed as a "natural" reflex of age-old grievances against Russian and other privileged ethnic groups' dominance, only thinly masked by Soviet internationalism. The stalled march toward "civilization" was thus interpreted as the result of correctable flaws, rather than the inevitable consequence of the Soviet collapse itself.

Today, the bankruptcy of liberal teleology is clearer than ever. Post-Soviet societies did not move, however haltingly, toward the promised horizon; instead they drifted, with occasional reversals, yet overall, in the opposite direction. More fundamentally, the very attempts to "return to the main road of civilization" helped dismantle the very conditions that had made that road attractive in the first place. At least for a historically circumscribed period, a few decades after World War II, and in a geographically limited set of places, above all the "West," "democratic capitalism" offered genuine economic advancement to large sections of the working class, drawing them into the new "middle classes" and integrating them politically into the bourgeois state and civil society. This hegemonic development within the US-centered order – the growth of political unity, organization, and consciousness of the ruling class that allowed it to forgo short-termist and particularistic interests in favor of a compromise with the subaltern classes – was never simply an intrinsic feature of capitalism itself, the formation which rests fundamentally on high inequality and exploitation, but a product of its dialectical relationship with the social-revolutionary threat, above all with the Soviet revolution. At its height, especially after the defeat of fascism, the Soviet Union represented a credible counterhegemonic pole on a global scale, convincingly claiming political leadership toward a fundamentally more progressive order for subaltern classes around the world. The expansion of social revolution posed an existential threat of mass expropriation to the ruling class, compelling capitalism to reform itself in progressive directions. This is the dynamic Gramsci famously theorized as "passive revolution" – one through which the ruling class preempts social revolution by conceding partial reforms to the subaltern classes while preserving and expanding its own power, and whose twentieth-century Fordist variant was driven above all by competition with the Soviet counterhegemonic pole (De Smet, 2016, pp. 55–59; Gramsci, 1971, pp. 114, 120, 282, 314–315; Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, forthcoming). Welfare states, expanded suffrage, social rights, progress toward gender equality – all bore the imprint of the Soviet challenge. As long as the USSR offered an alternative perceived as viable and desirable, capitalism remained dynamic and inclusive. Once the Soviet revolution began to degenerate and then collapsed, and with it any plausible social-revolutionary threat, there was less and less restraint on the neoliberal rollback. By inertia, Western democracies could still seduce the middle classes on the peripheries with the promise of integration into the global elite. But the foundations of that promise were already crumbling. The kind of "proper" capitalism that many (ex-)Soviet citizens once aspired to join was itself eroding: inequality widened, welfare states were hollowed out by austerity, and politics slid toward polarization, populist backlashes, and increased authoritarian trends even in "consolidated" Western democracies.

The Soviet revolution was both capitalism's antagonist and its corrective. It failed to build communism, but in striving toward it, it did transform the country, the region, and the world profoundly. Soviet revolutionary and modernizing success does not annul the terror, famines, and ethnic deportations of Stalin's era, nor the debilitating bureaucratic despotism of the late Soviet period. However, the usual way of staging the discussion – whether Soviet achievements "justified" the violence – is intellectually, politically, and morally wrong. This was not a matter of a "free choice" between equally

possible, "justified" and "nonjustified" options. This retrospective trial presumes that "normal life" under the capitalist order was not only the sole admissible alternative but was even possible for the majority without a social-revolutionary challenge. This false premise is unraveling before our eyes. The question of the "price" of the Soviet revolution is invoked not to defend human lives from unjustified violence, but to discredit the very idea of social revolution – rational and radical social transformation in the interests of subaltern classes through their conscious and organized collective action – which threatened ruling-class interests far more than it offended their conscience. As if an even higher human "price" were not being paid today, in a world where social revolution has been foreclosed.

The bitter irony is that the years following the Soviet collapse, culminating in the Russia–Ukraine war, have not produced a principled abhorrence of political violence. On the contrary, such violence has been normalized in the public sphere. Even yesterday's Soviet dissidents, contemporary human rights defenders and liberals discover, with remarkable ease, reasons to justify – or at least to look away from – the "unfortunate excesses" of Ukraine's post-Euromaidan realities, which radicalized further under the full-scale war: capturing men on the streets, thousands prosecuted under politically motivated statutes, prison terms for social media "likes" and private conversations, ethnic assimilation policies, religious persecution, the suppression of opposition parties, and calls for categorical discrimination and the collective punishment of entire social groups.[2] All of this becomes tolerable – and in their eyes mostly reasonable – so long as it is carried out not in the name of social revolution but in the name of a specific national project for Ukraine and an ever more delusional promise of integration into "civilization": aspirations that have been, from the outset, explicitly oriented toward the destruction of everything the revolution built.

Demography makes this hypocrisy measurable: despite the Holodomor, the Great Terror, WWII and their postponed demographic consequences, Soviet Ukraine's population reached about 52 million by 1991, the high point of the modernizing trajectory. By contrast, the UN's most recent median projection points to roughly 15 million by 2100 (even under the overly optimistic assumption that the war would have been over by 2025)[3] – an existential threat to Ukraine's future. Importantly, the war did not begin this slide but sharply accelerated it, deepening the demographic trends of mass emigration, collapsing fertility, and preventable mortality that had already defined the post-Soviet decades, in which "national revival" was paralleled by an ageing, ever-poorer, and de-industrializing society within ever-shrinking borders. And so the question that the rhetoric of "price" tries to monopolize by depreciating Soviet achievements returns with a sharper edge: what could politically or morally "justify" a project of nationhood that ends by undermining the capacity to reproduce itself of the very society carrying the identity supposedly at stake in this war?

What defined the particular brutality of the twentieth-century struggles on Ukrainian lands was that Ukraine was a critical territory of the social revolution: the core of the industrial base on which Soviet socialism relied, the breadbasket without which counterrevolution might have prevailed, and a crucible of cultural and scientific innovation. In that fight, Ukrainians were an integral part of the force that changed the world, and in the process built the foundations of their own modern economy, state, culture, and society. The foundations that thirty-five years of post-Soviet crisis, comprador reforms, and military cataclysm have not been sufficient to fully eradicate, and whose legacy still shapes the material reality and consciousness of Ukrainians today. Outside the western regions, the majority of Ukrainians (beyond narrow, mostly intellectual circles) underwent the transition from pre-modern lo-

2 Systematic research on this large yet widely overlooked, or actively denied, dimension of wartime social reality in Ukraine remains scarce. For references to specific cases, see, for example, Marcetic (2023); Ishchenko & Korotaev (2025); Kasianov (2026).

3 United Nations. World Population Prospects 2024, https://population.un.org/wpp/graphs?loc=804&type=Probabilistic%20Projections&category=Population&subcategory=1_Total%20Population.

cal identities to a modern Ukrainian ethnonational identity within the Soviet Union. For many of them, especially in the late Soviet period, that identity was entirely compatible with shifting to Russian, not as a language of oppression, but as a language of upward mobility and social advancement. The Bolsheviks did not "invent" Ukraine. It is even possible that without the competition with the short-lived project of the Ukrainian People's Republic of moderate socialists and bourgeois nationalists during the Civil War they would not have instituted the separate Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic at all. But the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians became a modern nation in and through the Soviet revolution – even if that national vision of Soviet Ukraine was typically unrecognized, long despised, and is now being erased by nominal Ukrainian nationalists. Ironically, those who claimed to speak for the nation were often the enemies of its real historical development, while the nation itself was built by those who fought not for a national-particularistic but for a social-universal project.

Soviet state socialism "failed" only in its relative contest with capitalism, which for a time seemed to deliver more, until it became less and less capable of doing so. This returns us to the question of "which Ukraine" in a different register. The ethnonationalist rejection of Soviet Ukraine – as not "properly" Ukrainian, as "Russified," as lacking independence from Russia – could have been justified, at least on its own terms, if a stronger, more prosperous, more advanced Ukraine had in fact been built on the ruins of the Soviet legacy. But has not precisely the opposite occurred? Soviet Ukraine was an integral part of the struggle that created a world in which such a bet could even appear plausible. The defeat of that struggle, together with the collapse of Soviet Ukraine, undermined the very foundations of this possibility.

Post-Soviet Fractures

For Ukraine, what followed after 1991 was not a transition toward a new progressive or even stable formation, but a protracted and escalating sociopolitical crisis. The crisis began well before the Soviet collapse and Ukrainian independence, and has not ended despite proclamations of national consolidation supposedly achieved through a series of nation-building *maidan* revolutions (1990, 2004, 2014) and resistance to Russia's attempt at subjugation. Millions of Ukrainians in annexed Crimea and the seceded Donbas since 2014, in the southern regions rapidly occupied by Russia in 2022, along with those who fled to Russia from 2014 onward and after 2022, and an even larger number of refugees in the EU (many of whom are increasingly absorbed into building new lives abroad) have been routinely erased from teleological nation-building narratives. These narratives typically rely on polls that have almost always excluded a large and ever-growing share of Ukrainian citizens outside the territory under the government's control, and that by now cover only roughly two-thirds of the population estimated to have lived in Ukraine at the onset of the war[4] – not to mention a not insignificant minority of respondents who dissent from the "national consensus" even on the most sensitive questions (such as who is to blame for the war) (Ishchenko, 2023a, pp. 272–273).

Moreover, whatever "unity" appeared in 2022, it has proven to be short-lived, with divides over the use of the Russian language, forced conscription, corruption, and the terms of peace resurfacing in the public sphere, on social media, and in private (Artiukh & Fedirko, 2025; Gorbach, 2026; Ishchenko & Korotaev, 2025; Korotaev & Ishchenko, 2025). The consolidation can be called "national" only insofar as it excludes ever more Ukrainians from the nation itself. This is not to deny that certain groups have grown more cohesive over time and remained mobilized for the cause through the years of war. Yet this consolidation of a minority – a significant one, but still a minority – has proceeded in tandem with the steady loss of ever more Ukrainians beyond Ukraine's shrinking borders and the al-

4 Interfax-Ukraine. "There're 29 mln Ukrainians living in territory controlled by Ukraine, 4.3 mln in EU countries - Institute of Demography chief," 20.07.2026. https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/1186657.html.

ienation of many of those who stayed within them. From the perspective of the historical period since 1991 and the borders we inherited from the Soviet Ukraine, what has unfolded in post-Soviet years is continuous disintegration, with no coherent order emerging to replace what was lost. This pattern of fragmentation and polarization reemerged after each fragile moment of euphoric consolidation that briefly united some Ukrainians but ultimately left even more beyond the new boundaries: after the referendum for independence in 1991, after the maidans of 2004 and 2014, after Zelensky's election in 2019, and, eventually, after the full-scale invasion as well. This fluctuating, contentious, yet ultimately disintegrative dynamic has been the "normal" of Ukrainian society and politics, frequently mistaken as its "democratic" character when contrasted with the authoritarian stability of many of its post-Soviet neighbors.

This post-Soviet fragmentation was, however, neither predetermined nor an "automatic" manifestation of supposedly long-held divergences rooted in ethnocultural practices and identities: whether one thinks they should have been treated as a "normal" diversity to be recognized for the sake of Ukraine's peace and pluralism, or as the burden of a "postcolonial" legacy of Russian domination to be overcome for the sake of development. The divergences have been commonly associated with language, church, political culture, or historical memory, and often subsumed under the infamous "East/ West" divide, and exemplified by regional polarization on electoral maps. Neither the durability nor change of these ethnocultural practices and identities can be explained endogenously, unless we accept that some are inherently more "natural" for Ukrainians than others – that is, accept a primordialist premise shared, from opposite ends, by Ukrainian ethnonationalists and supporters of the triune Russian people concept. We need to look for an explanation on a different sociopolitical level altogether: one that identifies the sociopolitical processes that activated and sustained certain cultural differences while suppressing others, and that made fragmentation, rather than consolidation, the default trajectory of the post-Soviet period.

Furthermore, this disintegrative dynamic cannot be grasped within a national frame alone. Both typical culturalist narratives about Ukraine – of the "divided country" and of successful nation-building gradually overcoming the legacy of Russian domination – presuppose that post-Soviet sociopolitical dynamics were primarily an outcome of some peculiarity of Ukrainian or Russian history, and could be understood in isolation from the dynamics of the wider world. But the underlying crisis that has driven Ukraine to catastrophe has been global. To analyze it as though its origins lay primarily in ethnocultural divergences or in the historical relations between Ukraine and Russia is to remain trapped within the very bankrupt paradigms we need to overcome. What is needed instead is an integral explanation capable of placing the processes in Ukraine, in Russia, the relations between them, and the world crisis into a single coherent theoretical framework – not because Ukraine and the broader post-Soviet region merely reflected global trends, but because it was here that the crisis manifested itself earlier and developed further, and in doing so, profoundly shaped the world.

The concept of the dual crisis of revolution and hegemony supplies the crucial pillars of such a framework.[5] It grounds the analysis of post-Soviet disintegration in political fragmentation, disorganization, and disarticulation of the fundamental social groups – the classes – in the very process of Soviet degeneration and collapse, and it connects these dynamics to the transformation of global capitalism rather than treating them as a provincial anomaly. The concept that binds both dimensions of this dual crisis, and that has gained ever wider currency in recent years, is political capitalism.

Political capitalism points to both a global political-economic convergence process slowly unfolding since the 1970s and the shift from the virtuous circle of counterhegemonic revolution and hegemonic capitalism to the compounded crisis of both. On one side of this convergence stands the Western

5 This theoretical framework is outlined most systematically in Ishchenko & Zhuravlev (forthcoming). Earlier published works containing some of the most important conceptual building blocks include Ishchenko (2024a) and Ishchenko & Kalb (2026).

trajectory: the erosion of "democratic capitalism," that configuration lasting for roughly three decades after the Second World War in which exceptionally high growth rates during the "Long Boom" had sustained a positive-sum hegemonic politics and an unprecedented integration of the working class into the bourgeois state (Riley & Brenner, 2025). Under conditions of secular stagnation and declining returns on productive investment, that configuration has given way to one driven not by industrial growth but by politically manipulated asset prices, where various fractions of capital, and workers themselves, increasingly turn to the state to extract resources in a zero-sum competition that fragments both the ruling and the working classes, hollows out liberal-democratic institutions, and fills the vacuum with technocracy, identitarian populism, and escalating authoritarian trends, while opportunist elites continue to pump wealth from the bottom to the top.

On the other side stands the trajectory of the regimes born of twentieth-century social revolutions and typically led by communist parties in the Global South (the paradigmatic case being China) – regimes that have stopped being part of a global alternative to capitalism but succeeded in modernizing their societies and in the process turned into managers of national capitalism (Milanović, 2019). Here the power of a sovereign state, autonomous from the emerging capitalist class and run by technocratically effective bureaucracies, has offered a comparatively effective developmental model exploiting the global opportunities opened by the political-capitalist shift in the West, though one undermined by endemic corruption and the absence of the rule of law.

Both of these shifts – in the West and in the Global South – were fundamentally enabled by the degeneration of the Soviet revolution, which dismantled the global counterhegemonic pole and removed the social-revolutionary threat against which the bourgeoisie had been compelled to consolidate, expand its organization, and integrate the subaltern classes through its own hegemonic apparatus. The counterhegemonic pole began to disintegrate globally starting from the Sino-Soviet split and the ruptures of 1968 – the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the rise of the New Left, the Eurocommunist drift – in parallel with decomposing from within through the patrimonial fragmentation of the late Soviet elite and the institutional and ideological ossification of the Communist Party itself. Post-Soviet disintegration thus was not an exotic deviation from the global norm but structurally continuous with a transformation that has been reshaping capitalism everywhere. Moreover, it was one of its crucial drivers, the vanguard of a global fragmentation.

This is why post-Soviet political capitalism assumed an especially predatory form, developing directly out of the centrifugal disintegration of the Communist Party's counterhegemonic apparatus – the principal political structure that had integrated and modernized Soviet society – and leaving behind no organized social force from below capable of checking the ruling predators. Consequently, the massive capital accumulated by the state was appropriated by political capitalists: the dominant fraction of the emerging post-Soviet ruling class (including but not limited to the notorious "oligarchs") whose competitive advantage derived not from technological innovation or super-exploitation of the labor force, but from selective state benefits, often acquired through "corruption," exploiting loopholes in legislation and patronage networks (Ishchenko, 2022b, 2024a). Post-Soviet political capitalists' typical mode of operation was short-termist and opportunistic, extracting rents, shifting capital offshore, and disinvesting domestically (Dzarasov, 2013) – a model that, when taken to its conclusion, leads to sociopolitical disintegration. At best, it could offer the stability of stagnation, which is not something to underestimate, and which has been valued by significant sections of the post-Soviet working class, especially in heavy industry and the public sector, whose livelihoods were bound to paternalist arrangements with their employers (Gorbach, 2024).

However, Ukrainian political capitalists have been consistently successful in undermining the establishment of stable coercive rule organized from above by authoritarian leaders who, in most other post-Soviet countries, proved eventually capable of enforcing the long-term interests of the ruling class through a combination of coercion, corruption, and patronage. Gramsci used the term Caesa-

rism to describe an autonomous third force that stabilizes a society torn apart to the point of driving the country toward catastrophe, shifting the balance in favor of one class or another (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 219–222).[6] Yet none of the potential candidates for Ukraine's "Caesar" – Kuchma, Yanukovych, Poroshenko, or even Zelensky (at least so far) – succeeded in consolidating rule and strengthening the sovereign state, even under the favorable circumstances of foreign threat and war. The reason for this may lie in a paradox of the Soviet revolution in Ukraine – at once one of its modernization achievements and one of its failures. Soviet Ukraine built economic powerhouses in the southern and eastern parts of the country – Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia – but did not strengthen the political center in Kyiv (Kibita, 2024). This problem perpetuated itself through the years of post-Soviet Ukraine, providing a source of power to the fractions of political capitalists who appropriated the Soviet legacy against an insufficiently strong central power. Whether the war has resolved it by transforming Ukraine's political-economic geography in the most brutal of ways remains to be seen.

This dynamic formed the basis of Ukraine's "regional" cleavage and its profound class and political asymmetries. Ukraine's "Western" and "Eastern" camps may have appeared roughly equal on the electoral maps of the 2000s, but they were crucially asymmetrical in terms of which class interests they represented, how those interests were organized politically, and the degree to which they could be hegemonically universalized – presented not as particular interests but as the common interests of broader social groups. Systematic local disinvestment by political capitalists in Ukraine prevented them from relying on a substantial loyal middle class integrated through selective redistribution (Rosenfeld, 2021). This is why the "Eastern" civil society, which could legitimize the rule of and universalize the interests of Ukrainian political capitalists, was profoundly weaker (Ishchenko, 2023b). This was, in practice, either organizations existing more on paper than as civic associations, or television pundits and influencers tied to oligarchs by money rather than any ideology. It was this mercenary relationship that shaped their pragmatic calculations when the full-scale war erupted: their choices were driven less by any sense of "identity" than by risk avoidance or even by the pursuit of new opportunities by switching to the opposite political camp and becoming "more Catholic than the pope" in performative national-patriotic "conversion" (Zubchenko, 2022). And instead of a "militant" wing, this camp had the Communist Party of Ukraine, with its aging membership and opportunistic leadership, which proved unable to defend even itself against post-Euromaidan repression (Ishchenko, 2023c).

The "Eastern" camp in Ukrainian politics, often misleadingly labeled "pro-Russian," exploited the legacy of Soviet Ukraine materially and symbolically, but could not build on it or on an alternative tradition any forward-looking project for post-Soviet Ukraine. The aspiration that could be properly called "pro-Russian" – that is, closer political, economic, and ideological integration with Russia – appealed to the past or to the promise of stability under a more effective authoritarian state rather than to future prospects of development. The ideas of "multi-vector" neutrality or a "bridge" between Russia and the EU lacked positive modernizing content. Whatever national or nationalist agenda this camp articulated never amounted to more than legitimating the opportunism of the political capitalists and their claims against either Russian encroachment or the demands of transnational capital. If Ukraine moved neither toward the "West" nor toward Russia, then where? And Ukraine did not have the privilege of simply staying where it was, because this effectively meant accepting the prolongation of the downward spiral of the crisis.

This is why the main ideological frame capable of mobilizing voters for the "Eastern" camp, beyond patronage networks, was the threat of "fascism" – reactive, invoking an existential evil from the past and the specter of chaos and violence threatening fragile stability. However, there was hardly any frame offering a positive vision of Ukraine's development. The "fascist" label was not without

6 For the elaboration on the use of the Caesarism concept for post-Soviet context, see Artiukh (2020); Ishchenko & Kalb (2026, pp. 149–150); Ishchenko & Zhuravlev (forthcoming).

referent, even if generalizing it: since the 1990s the far-right nationalists had formed a small but most militant wing of the "Western" camp, while ethnonationalism had been gradually developing among the national intelligentsia since the late Soviet period. Yet the "fascism" framing also worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy in a dynamic of escalating polarization. The far right and ethnonationalism were eventually strengthened, seizing the opportunities offered by the hegemonic deficiency of the ruling class, mass protests, failed Caesarist attempts, and the growing Russian threat – moving into Ukrainian civil society and the political mainstream, shaping policies and dominant discourse on national identity, peace, and war, and building electoral, organizational violence, and military capacities (Colborne, 2022; Ishchenko, 2014, 2018; Katchanovski, 2026; Mierzejewski-Voznyak, 2018; Umland, 2020).

Unlike in Russia or Belarus, the formation of a significant "Western" camp was not prevented or repressed, and it enjoyed far greater political opportunities in Ukraine. The "Western" camp was not an alternative "oligarchic clan" or a "financial-industrial group," even if it occasionally gained opportunistic allies among political capitalists. The "East/West" divide expressed politically the conflict between the interests of transnational capital, which sought to dismantle selective protectionism, and the collective class interest of local political capitalists in a sovereign state on which their major competitive advantage depended. Western integration promised a future of development, an appeal that drew on the still-potent if eroding attraction of "democratic capitalism." That promise grew more exclusive as the years passed, addressed most to those who believed themselves "deserving" of higher rewards and status by virtue of their scarce skills and education. Much of the Soviet intelligentsia and the post-Soviet professional middle class, excluded first by the Communist nomenklatura and later from the circuits of political capitalism, came to see their advancement in incorporation into the US-centered order, in particular, through its transnational institutions, including NATO, which until 2014 its supporters presented less as protection against any threat from Russia than as a step toward joining "civilization" (Boucoyannis, 2025; Zhyrun, 2026). The most organized segment of Ukrainian post-Soviet civil society emerged as an extension of or became integrated with the transnational bourgeois hegemonic apparatus – NGOs funded by Western donors, think tanks, media outlets, and select universities – and had little connection to the mostly small and scattered grassroots initiatives that addressed the socioeconomic problems of subaltern classes (Ishchenko, 2017, pp. 216–218). After all, the pro-Western middle class has typically despised the plebeian masses below – paternalistic workers, public sector employees, pensioners – whose attachment to Soviet guarantees, to "oligarchic" patrons, and to Caesarist strongmen marked them as a ballast on the path toward "civilization." This is how class, "civil society," and nationalism were intermingled in post-Soviet politics. Nationalism was also an ideological tool for distancing Ukraine from "backward" Russia and the "Soviet legacy." This is why seemingly cosmetic measures – such as renaming streets, dismantling Soviet monuments, glorification of Nazi-collaborationist nationalists, removing the Russian language from the public sphere and public space, and so on – could be seen not simply as the assertion of a specific national identity but as important signs of social progress. They also functioned as a vehicle for affirming class distinction against a large part of the country stereotyped as poorer, "losers," uncivic, "Sovietized" and "Russified" residents of the more industrialized "East."

This is the political-economic dynamic that lay behind secular fragmentation in the post-Soviet period: the working-out of a class conflict emerging in the very process of Soviet collapse and post-Soviet disintegration as part of the global turn to political capitalism. The conflict was between local political capitalists, whose competitive advantage depended on a sovereign state shielding selective protectionism, and a professional middle class allied with transnational capital, whose advancement depended on comprador integration. The "Western" and "Eastern" camps – in Ukraine and elsewhere across the post-Soviet space – were the political representation of this class conflict, which was at the same time an intra-class conflict setting against each other factions of the ruling and working classes

in a continuous political fragmentation. Neither camp could consolidate a majority behind a positive program of development. The "Western" promised a modernization whose costs would fall disproportionately on the poorer majority, and rested its appeal on integration into a "civilization" that was itself sliding into deeper crisis. The "Eastern" could offer only stabilization amidst the crisis without any clear vision of development; in response to the disintegrative dynamics, it could not present an alternative center of integration. Ethnicized polarization – mobilization against the "fascist" threat to the fragile stability, on the one side, or, on the other side, against the threat to a peculiar ethnonational identity but also a shaky promise of the future as a "normal country" in the "civilized" international order – was stepping into the void of insufficient hegemonic capacity to win stable majoritarian support by an affirmative program. As a result of the class asymmetry, the "Western" camp was, nevertheless, better positioned to organize and mobilize than its rival, and more able to present its particular interests as universal; these advantages let it push its agenda further than its electoral support warranted. The maidans brought together diverse groups in massive but short-lived mobilizations, and empowered the "Western" camp. But they repeatedly failed to consolidate the nation. The "Western" camp staked its own and the whole nation's bet on the integration into the US-centered order, which increasingly diverged from the ideological imaginary of hegemonic "democratic capitalism" at its peak. In the process, it helped erode and destabilize the economic, institutional, and social foundations inherited from Soviet Ukraine, without the internal capacity or external backing to replace them with anything stronger or more legitimate, and so contributed to the further escalation of the dual crisis.

Maidans and the Crisis of Revolution

In 2016, the prominent Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak ruefully admitted:

> The irony is that Ukraine is perhaps the last country in Europe where Europe, European unity, and European values are taken very seriously – so seriously that people are ready to sacrifice a great deal, even their lives. This was what the Euromaidan showed. And against this background, of course, there is great disappointment (Kostiuk, 2016).

But the disappointment of the Ukrainian national-liberal intelligentsia masked a far greater tragedy. Consider a thought experiment. Imagine that in 1985, or even slightly later, somewhere in the Global South, a pro-Soviet revolution breaks out. The new government swears allegiance to the socialist path (with national specifics) and begs for help against American imperialism and its local proxies. Rapacious neighbors are preparing to crush the communist threat and seize poorly defended territories. The popular masses, having overthrown a corrupt dictator, look with hope to the most progressive country in the world, the defender of all oppressed peoples. But at that very moment in Moscow, the first *perestroika* rallies are gathering. The movements for independence are forming in the national republics. On distant peripheries, ethnic pogroms are brewing. The entire "progressive" Soviet public watches with profound bewilderment as revolutionaries in some distant "Third World" country actually believe in Marxism-Leninism – unlike the party ideologues – suspects that it is all lies from *Pravda*, and feels no burning desire to fulfill their "internationalist duty." Meanwhile, the Soviet leadership, losing control of the country, is in no position to get entangled in a new war.

Incidentally, something like this, only slightly earlier, actually happened in Afghanistan. Then the Soviet Union withdrew, and the war in Afghanistan continued for over thirty years until 2021, when the Taliban rapidly seized control of the country in one of the spectacular manifestations of the crisis of the US-centered order.

If this sounded familiar, even if contentious, in the immediate post-Euromaidan years in Ukraine, it has become far more apparent since 2025, when Trump escalated the crisis, and the EU – increasingly fragmented, retreating from its own proclaimed values and commitments – struggles to mount any

collective sovereignty. The student waving an EU flag on Kyiv Maidan square now looks like a Black child waving a Kalashnikov under the banner of Marx, Engels, and Lenin in the late 1980s.

There is, however, an important difference between social and maidan revolutions. The Soviet revolution – and the social revolutions it inspired and supported worldwide – aimed at overcoming capitalism, and in posing a real threat to it, compelled capitalism's own transformation – its hegemonic development and democratization. The post-Soviet maidans shared with social revolutions the abstract revolutionary form – the sovereign will of "the people" asserted against the government through mass protest mobilization (Sewell, 1996) – but neither the depth of the social-revolutionary challenge to the ruling class nor the capacity to articulate and establish a radically different and superior social order. This deficiency followed from a counterhegemonic weakness: the political fragmentation of the subaltern classes, their disorganization, disunity, and disarticulation – itself the immediate outcome of the Soviet revolution's degeneration, especially pronounced in post-Soviet societies but exacerbated worldwide as the dual crisis unfolded. Nor were the maidans unique in this respect. They belong to the category of loosely organized popular responses that react to the diminishing legitimacy of elites and the authoritarian trends of the global turn toward political capitalism, while paradoxically contributing to their reproduction and intensification (Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, 2021). Similar "deficient revolutions" proliferated through the post-Cold War decades and erupted far beyond the post-Soviet space – the Arab Spring of 2011 among the most prominent waves, the recent Gen-Z revolution in Nepal and the repressed protests in Iran that preceded the US–Israeli aggression among the latest. In their counterhegemonic weakness, they share fundamental features with the broader manifestations of contemporary "hyper-politics" – populism, identitarianism, affective polarization – all marked by heightened politicization without organization (Jäger, 2026).

However, deficient revolutions did not simply "change nothing," even if they produced no social-revolutionary outcomes, i.e., radical or rapid transformations of fundamental class and state structures. The combination of revolutionary form with counterhegemonic weakness had significant political consequences, in particular, contributing to further sociopolitical destabilization.[7] According to Beissinger's (2022) systematic analysis of all revolutionary episodes since 1900, contemporary "urban civic revolutions" tend to increase expressive political liberties substantially but also, in contrast to social revolutions, tend to weaken state capacity, fail to curb rising crime rates or reduce corruption, exacerbate social inequality and ethnic tensions, and ultimately undermine the stability and legitimacy of post-revolutionary regimes (pp. 359–416). Deficient revolutions may succeed in breaking regimes but fail to construct stronger alternatives in their place, leaving behind even more fragmented sociopolitical orders.

From a global perspective, the post-Soviet maidans proved to be failed attempts at integration into the US-centered order contributing to its downward crisis trajectory. Directed against the legacy of the Soviet revolution, they were destroying the old without the capacity to build anything solid in its place. They did not challenge the globally dominant social order nor offer a fundamentally different alternative. As a result, they launched neither a social-revolutionary nor a passive-revolutionary dynamic, but a further disintegrative one. Maidans and other contemporary deficient revolutions have been a manifestation and, at the same time, a mechanism of development and escalation of the interconnected and mutually amplifying crises of revolution and hegemony.

The deepening of the sociopolitical destabilization has been the outcome of contemporary deficient revolutions, produced precisely by the combination of the revolutionary form with the counterhegemonic weakness – working-class disunity, disorganization, and disarticulation – which the deficient revolutions do not overcome but exacerbate. This, in turn, contributes to a deepening crisis of hegemony – the further political fragmentation of the ruling class – and an intensification of disintegrative

7 This concept of deficient revolutions is further developed in Ishchenko (2025).

effects. The Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Euromaidan of 2014 illustrate the dynamic concretely. Maidans defied the Caesarist attempts of Viktor Yanukovych (and also of Russia) and asserted the will of "the people" against the government through massive protest mobilization. Typical of contemporary deficient revolutions, that mobilization remained only loosely organized, in amorphous coalitions, with vague demands and without coherent leadership (Bayat, 2017; Beissinger, 2022). Like all revolutions, they polarized society and politics, but also empowered certain social groups and political agents. However, unlike social revolutions, maidans produced polarization across rather than along the lines of the fundamental social classes, setting groups and fractions of the working and bourgeois classes against each other along the ever more ethnicizing "East/West" divide and contributing to their further political fragmentation. Maidans redefined the boundaries of the Ukrainian nation, excluding non-supporters as "insufficiently Ukrainian," uncivic, backward, plebeian, and Soviet, which happen to be more "Eastern" in both geographic and political senses (Baysha, 2018; Zhuravlev & Ishchenko, 2020). The responses were the Anti-Maidan mobilizations and the local support for the annexation of Crimea and the secession of the Donbas, for each of which the local Ukrainian constituency was essential even if Russia played a (variably) important role in their instigation, escalation, and completion (Arel & Driscoll, 2023; Katchanovski, 2026; Kudelia, 2025). The securitizing response by the "Western" camp, for its part, expelled those social groups, actors, their grievances, and interests from the boundaries of legitimate Ukrainian politics, reducing the entire issue to a Russian "hybrid war" against Ukraine and misrecognizing the local sources of counterrevolution. At the same time, the revolutionary amplification against the background of class disorganization was limited to the more privileged social groups and better-organized political agents – primarily the professional pro-Western NGOs and the radical nationalists – and to opportunistic "oligarchs" switching camps. The result was the empowerment of the agendas and interests that diverged from those of the Ukrainian majority and of most maidan participants themselves. The political empowerment of the "Western" camp, in turn, exacerbated the ethnicized polarization, as the camp sought to marginalize the constituencies and political agents that could obstruct its agenda of turning Ukraine into "the country of their dreams" through integration into the US-centered order and ethnonationalist transformation. The Minsk agreements, which would have reintegrated the seceded Donbas, were resisted precisely for that reason (Ishchenko, 2023b; Korotaev, 2023; Petro, 2023). Their implementation would indeed likely have blocked the "Western" agenda, but it might also have reestablished the social basis for Caesarist stabilization, politically strengthening the "Eastern" camp and opening possibilities for its readmission into the governing coalition.

The outcome was intensified post-Soviet class conflict and political fragmentation within the ruling class. The "Western" camp was strong enough to prevent any Caesarist consolidation of the political capitalists, but not enough to lead the ruling class, let alone the nation as a whole, around its own agenda. Its main promise of Ukraine's integration into the US-centered order was being undercut by the deepening crisis of that order itself and the narrowing possibilities for a properly hegemonic incorporation of Ukraine rather than mere defensive alignment against Russia. The "Western" camp could rally around Viktor Yushchenko in 2004, Petro Poroshenko in 2014 and 2019, and Volodymyr Zelensky in 2022 whenever it feared a reversal of Ukraine's Western trajectory – but each rally dissolved almost as quickly as it had formed. The underlying ruling-class fragmentation kept reasserting itself; the state kept losing legitimacy; no strong regime could entrench itself. The 73 percent vote in 2019 for a complete political outsider – one who fused the maidan-style rejection of "old elites" with widespread grievances against post-Euromaidan outcomes – showed how far the destabilization had gone. Within just two years, on the eve of full-scale war, Zelensky was already seen as no different from the "oligarchs" he had promised to displace, while he picked fights with all the major political-capitalist fractions – not only the "pro-Russian" ones of Viktor Medvedchuk but also those of Poroshenko and the richest person in the country, Rinat Akhmetov. The same pattern recurred in the disintegration of

the initial wartime rally around Zelensky amid growing war toll, shrinking victory expectations, and mounting corruption scandals.

What the dynamics of the deficient revolutions had ultimately set in motion was pushing Ukraine onto a course at odds with the long-term collective interests of post-Soviet political capitalists, yet incapable of consolidating the state and the nation around a different fraction of the ruling class. As a result, for the Kremlin, the maidan destabilizing trajectory was both a mounting threat and an opportunity to exploit. On the one hand, the strengthening of the "Western" camp and the positions of transnational capital – even where these would not produce formal EU and NATO integration in the foreseeable future – undermined the prospects for a sovereign center of capital accumulation in the post-Soviet region, of which the heavy industries inherited from Soviet Ukraine would have been an essential part. Insofar as there was neither offer nor possibility of hegemonic incorporation of post-Soviet political capitalists into the US-centered order *en bloc* – not just selectively and individually – that would have allowed them to pursue their collective interests within its framework, they had to be organized from outside and above, by Caesarist regimes – foremost Putin's. This was, in particular, the underlying issue behind Russia's exclusion from NATO expansion. Unlike in the case of Ukraine or Georgia, for Russia's inclusion either NATO or Russia would have had to be profoundly transformed: either NATO would lose its US-centered character, or Russia would undergo regime change and the installation of a more subservient elite to open the commanding heights of its economy and control its vast nuclear arsenal. The deficient revolutions across the post-Soviet states have ultimately threatened the post-Soviet political capitalists with disorganization and piecemeal political and economic marginalization, as has been gradually happening in post-Euromaidan Ukraine.

On the other hand, the maidans, which prevented the consolidation of local Caesarist regimes without building a stronger sovereign state in their place and reinforced destabilizing processes, also provided an opportunity for the Kremlin. Notably, the initial "special military operation" plan bet precisely on the Ukrainian political fragmentation and on the quick disintegration of centralized resistance (Watling et al., 2023; Zabrodskyi et al., 2022). The plan exaggerated but did not invent out of the blue the destabilizing trends that made Ukraine vulnerable. Even though the original plan failed quickly, triggering among Ukrainians a post-invasion rally and expectations of victory over Russia, these proved temporary and limited, and the deeper processes underlying sociopolitical disintegration in Ukraine and globally eventually reasserted themselves. In this perspective, the Russian invasion can be read as an attempted Caesarist solution imposed from abroad – the domestic Ukrainian ruling class having failed to produce one of its own – serving the long-term collective interests of the post-Soviet political capitalists amid the crumbling of the US-centered order, with Ukraine chosen as a supposedly easy battlefield.

The War and the States

The trajectory toward the war cannot be reduced to or even meaningfully explained as an outcome of individuals' miscalculations, delusions, or opportunism, however powerful those individuals were. Nor was the trajectory in any sense predetermined by the fissures of primordial identities, the legacy of "historical imperialism," or geopolitical conflicts. Emphasizing contingency and individual agency typically leads to abandoning any coherent explanation for macro-processes such as wars. Emphasizing determination tends to reproduce teleological narratives that selectively look for (and can always find!) retrospective corroborations in the past. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, this has led to reproducing ethnonationalist and liberal teleologies, or, from the opposite camp, an international "realism" that essentializes the interests of the complex class societies. All of these explanations fail to account for why and when the structural conflicts escalated toward war, and why they were not

prevented.[8] The dual crisis framework, instead, approaches the war focusing on dynamic political processes produced by *collective actions* and their failure to coalesce around the interests of fundamental social classes. These processes set the limits within which individual agency operates and condition which structural or "historical" conflicts are activated, and when. NATO expansion, Russian "imperialism," and ethnonationalism can only be explained through the political organization and disorganization of class interests as they emerged from the Soviet collapse, both regionally and globally. This is the most fundamental dynamic that led to the war, and it has also defined the war's looming outcome – for which the key issue was the capacity to mobilize and allocate human, economic, and military resources efficiently for the common effort, while undermining that same capacity in the adversary.

The outcome of the war has never been predetermined by the simple imbalance of resources between Ukraine and Russia, or between Russia and NATO. The "resources" are never simply "just there," as if automatically available because they show up in statistics. People, money, weapons must be organized, collected, extracted, bought – mobilized in a broad sense of the word – and then effectively allocated toward a common goal. These are sociopolitical processes, which run profoundly differently and with different outcomes depending on the character of the state, its capacity, and its relationship to the fundamental social classes. In fact, history offers many examples of smaller nations prevailing over far stronger adversaries in protracted, attritional wars, often with little or none of the kind of vast support from powerful allies that Ukraine has enjoyed. Revolutionary France after 1789 and revolutionary Russia after 1917 each repelled the counter-revolutionary interventions of great-power coalitions and later went on to dominate large parts of Europe for decades. Vietnam from the 1950s to the 1970s, Afghanistan from 1979 to 2021 prevailed likewise, and, most recently, Iran has shown it can stand against the strongest global and the strongest regional power at once, even after a decapitating strike. Time and again, social revolutions and national-liberation struggles prevailed against the odds by forging stronger, more mobilized states in the process of overcoming the existential threats from domestic and foreign counterrevolutions (Beissinger, 2022; Levitsky & Way, 2022). Furthermore, besides forging mobilizationist states at home, social revolutions could inspire massive international movements of solidarity that helped undermine counterrevolutions from abroad, at times even threatening revolutionary situations in the intervening states.

In Ukraine, however, the dynamic has been reversed. Maidan revolutions and nationalism were decisive factors in this war too, but they worked against the country's mobilizational capacity, not for it. The modern and highly mobilizationist state had already been built on Ukrainian soil by the Soviet revolution and the cataclysmic wars of the early twentieth century. The national project that might have built upon this legacy evaporated with the Soviet collapse, and the anti-Soviet nationalism that rushed into the vacuum was directed against the very foundations of that revolutionary modernization. The maidans, as deficient revolutions, could not put any stronger or more durable regime in place of the one they overthrew. Their ethnicized polarization fed disintegration, not consolidation – and not only within Ukraine. Identitarian, and simultaneously pro-Western, comprador, ethnonationalism only harmed the universalization of the Ukrainian cause that might have generated revolutionary solidarity inside Russia or across the Global South (Ishchenko, 2022a) – the very countries that have become crucial to sustaining the Russian economy since 2022. Instead, the "Western" camp that the maidans empowered bet Ukraine's fate on the US-centered order and could not lead any progressive modernization, since that order was itself sliding into deepening crisis.

The mass refusal to comply with state coercion – the millions of draft-dodgers, the hundreds of thousands absent without leave or deserted, the growing resistance to mobilization, nonviolent and increasingly violent – was therefore not merely an aggregate of individual survival strategies but the

8 See Bakalov (2024) for a systematic discussion of the critical gaps in the main explanatory narratives of the origins of the Russia-Ukraine war.

sharpest manifestation of the crisis of the Ukrainian state itself: a state that commanded little trust before the war and that has, despite the short-lived euphoria of 2022, eroded what remained of its citizens' trust during it. The brutal coercion of "busification" is the direct consequence, and it feeds back into a vicious circle of declining legitimacy of the state and elites, and deepening sociopolitical disintegration (Artiukh & Fedirko, 2025; Korotaev & Ishchenko, 2025). This is why nationalism has been turning ever more radicalized, ethnicized and divisive – an outcome that was neither inevitable nor in any way "natural" in the wartime country, given how it has been alienating many Ukrainians and eroding what international solidarity remained. However, it was also not "irrational." When the majority will not fight, the shrinking committed minority has to be mobilized all the harder, and the stakes pushed ever higher, so that the sacrifices already made will not be seen in vain. They must be constantly reassured that they are fighting not just for another corrupt government. When substantial progress toward integration into the transnational structures of the US-centered order, primarily EU and NATO, is far harder to achieve – often impossible, and cutting against the powerful vested interests both in the West and among domestic political capitalists – the radicalization of ethnonationalist "de-Russification," "decommunization," and "decolonization" becomes the easiest way to deliver the "Ukraine of their dreams," even if it has never been a dream of the majority of Ukrainians.

Post-Soviet Ukraine was neither a "divided nation" in the culturalist sense, nor a case of progressive nation-building. It was caught in a continuous and unresolved crisis of nationhood. Nationalism here was not a part of modernization. On the contrary, it aimed against its legacy, while trying to carve a niche among the privileged classes of a "civilization" it hoped to join. However, if that "civilization" was itself plunging into crisis, then what announced itself as Ukrainian nation-building proved to be, in retrospect, its opposite: Ukraine's disintegration and demodernization.

Compare the mobilization crisis in Ukraine – the country supposedly waging an "existential" war – with the steady supply of volunteers to the Russian army.[9] What matters is not that this supply rests primarily on high and rising material compensation, but that the Kremlin has been able to keep raising and paying it for over three years running, under heavy sanctions and without anything approaching the foreign aid Ukraine has received. Every explanation resting on the imbalance of resources between the two states must therefore confront a simple question: why did the Western countries, incomparably richer than Russia, not simply offer Ukraine more financial support, enough to raise soldiers' pay to a level that would draw volunteers from the Ukrainian working class on something like the Russian scale, sparing the country the need for ever more coercive mobilization, and to hire more foreign mercenaries besides? Part of the reason is the political fragmentation in the West: even aid at its current level – indispensable for Ukraine, yet relatively low as a share of EU and US GDP (Bomprezzi et al., 2025) – has quickly opened widening divisions among Western elites and populations. But the more disturbing part of the answer is that more money would not have bought many more Ukrainian soldiers – as the failure of the lucrative 2025 youth contracts to draw any substantial number of volunteers even from the healthiest 18–24 cohort made plain (Nieczypor, 2026). Raising the sums the state promises would not have the expected effect when its institutions are weak and its citizens fundamentally distrust it. And here the war exposed the decisive difference between Ukraine and Russia – a difference formed by the divergent dynamics of the dual crisis.

Consider how the West has so far failed not only to strengthen Ukraine sufficiently but also to undermine Russia. Western military support for Ukraine was ultimately bounded by the threshold of a direct NATO–Russia conflict, with its likely escalation into nuclear war (Allison, 2025). The plausible Ukrainian and NATO strategy for victory therefore lay elsewhere: inciting splits within the Russian elite and society through escalating sanctions, mounting battlefield casualties, intensifying strikes on oil refineries and logistical infrastructure meant to disrupt everyday life and state revenues, and the

9 Russia has recruited roughly 1000 new soldiers per day on average since 2024 (Kluge, 2026).

"canceling" of Russians and Russian culture on international platforms. The costs of the allegedly "irrational" war were supposed to outweigh the tolerance of both the Russian elite and the broader population – neither prepared to suffer for war aims they had never really embraced – and so to undermine Russia *from within*, on the further assumption, which may prove mistaken, that Ukraine could sustain its own mobilization long enough for that pressure to tell. Naturally, Russian oligarchs would abandon or even conspire against Putin to recover their assets and their trade with the West. Certainly, the Russian middle class would choose the freedoms of global consumption and professional mobility over isolation and humiliation. Of course, Russian workers would revolt against the rising cost of living and the new waves of forced mobilization that would follow once the flow of volunteers dried up. What point was there in enduring further inconveniences for Putin's "historical fantasies"? And undoubtedly, the supremacy of Western "civilized" democracy would stand revealed against Russian "barbaric" despotism.

While the power of attraction that "democratic capitalism" could still exert by inertia once helped subvert the decaying Soviet Union, and later destabilize weaker post-Soviet regimes by enticing opportunistic elites and a comprador middle class, it has consistently failed against Russia in the twenty-first century. The grievances against the war among certain sections of the Russian elites and workers are real, and may yet produce protests, elite conspiracies, or armed mutinies like the Wagner private military company's failed revolt of 2023. But they need not bring the regime down. The risk of catastrophic destabilization, amid the waning hegemonic appeal of the US-centered order, is real as well. So far, however, Putin's Caesarist authoritarianism – unlike the chaotic aftermath of the maidans – has strengthened the sovereign state, serving the long-term collective interests of the Russian ruling class and also creating a substantial loyal middle-class segment based in the public sector (Rosenfeld, 2021). This contrast between a conservative and a deficient-revolutionary response to the dual crisis is essential for understanding why the war has strengthened the Russian state while eroding the Ukrainian one, and why wartime mobilization has run along such divergent paths in the two countries.

Just as Ukrainian consolidation has been misunderstood and exaggerated – serving, rather, as a discourse that masked largely the opposite disintegrative dynamic – so Russian consolidation during the war has been misread and underestimated. It has been seen either as support for an imperial ideology inherent in Russian culture and history, or as the indifferent, depoliticized conformism of the majority, compounded by repression and the emigration of an oppositional minority (incomparably smaller than the dissenting groups Ukraine has lost to annexation, occupation, emigration, or domestic repression and alienation since 2014). Both readings presume a predetermined reproduction – of ideology, or of passive conformism – and miss the sociopolitical dynamic bound to the trajectory of the Russian state sector and the war economy (Ishchenko et al., 2023). The precise character of this consolidating dynamic remains a matter of preliminary exploration and debate. Some describe it as the development of an anti-Western national identity (Matveeva, 2025), others as merely "soft patriotism" – not even properly nationalism – reduced to strengthening loyalty to the country or even a specific region (Zhuravlev et al., 2025). Yet among specific social groups something more may be at work, rooted in their socioeconomic collective interests. Segments of the working class that benefit from military Keynesianism may be undergoing something like a Fordist incorporation, though without its organizational component – trade unions and parties (Morris, 2026). In our data, some Russian respondents (who tend to be state-connected middle class) articulated a discourse of a progressively developing, modernizing, and *just* sociopolitical order that the Russian state organizes, one in which they believe it is possible to rise legitimately into the elite, and that extends even to substantive support for some essential elements of the authoritarian technocratic rule (Ishchenko, 2026).[10] If in Ukraine the

10 Based on the analysis of the in-depth interviews collected in 2024-25 within the "Wars after Revolution: Maidan and the Post-Soviet Crisis of Hegemony" project led by Volodymyr Ishchenko and Oleg Zhuravlev, and supported by Alameda Institute, https://alameda.institute/war-after-revolution/. Matveev &

main hope for modernizing development rested on the integration into the US-centered international order and the civic activism of a minority, in Russia the source of development is the state itself. At the same time, even those Russians who expect nothing from their state typically take the order it upholds for granted, whatever they think of the regime or the war. Ukrainians, however, tend to judge their state against inflated and unfulfilled expectations of what it owes them, and most do not consider themselves obliged to give their lives for it. Putin's Caesarism organizes passive consent through coercion and patronage – and, especially since 2022, through money. The Russian state can keep buying its soldiers by contract as long as it can pay. In Ukraine, by contrast, deficient revolutions have produced active alienation. The Ukrainian state needs its citizens to trust it, and no amount of money can buy that back. It is left to take its soldiers by capture, further exacerbating the vicious circle of state delegitimation and sociopolitical destabilization. The full-scale war sharply posed the need for a sustained, national-scale effort to mobilize people and resources from society over a long period, and it demonstrated how consequential this fundamental difference in the post-Soviet countries' responses to the dual crisis is.

Whether any of these dynamics will mature into a genuine hegemonic development in Russia – and even open the potential for a counterhegemonic one, as hypothesized earlier (Ishchenko, 2024b, pp. 63, 74) – remains to be seen.[11] It may ultimately turn on whether post-Soviet political capitalism comes to follow the Chinese model in some substantial respects (Milanović, 2019), which would become possible if China consolidated itself into an alternative hegemonic pole for the global ruling classes, above all in the Global South. But even without such a hegemonic development, Russian Caesarism is at least sliding into crisis more slowly than Ukraine, and perhaps more slowly than the West. In a war of attrition, that may be enough to win. Meanwhile, the prolonged costs of aiding Ukraine, together with the blowback from sanctions, have only deepened the political fragmentation of the Western ruling class, sharpening divisions within and between Western nations. Failing in its capacity for global leadership, that ruling class resorts to ever more coercive action, betting on its current military supremacy – and so finishing off the US-centered international order rather than restoring US global dominance.

Futures (If Any)

Post-Soviet Ukraine's future has typically been described through comparisons with foreign nations, a manifestation, in itself, of the loss of one's own developmental agenda. The Soviet Union, Ukraine included, once aimed to "catch up with and overtake America," while striving to build a superior social order. Having lost that intrinsic and self-determined source of futurity, Ukraine was compelled to seek its vision in the image of others. Simultaneously, the crisis of all hegemonic projects reveals itself in the erosion of political language: words like "democracy," "rule of law," and "sovereignty" have lost any illusory self-evidence. We are left only with the primitive recourse of pointing to foreign examples, hoping they will be immediately understood and accepted as positive, without problematizing by whom. As time passed, these adopted models formed a deflated, regressive trajectory that became ever less ambitious and ever less inclusive for Ukrainians across different locations, cultures, and classes.

For example, on the eve of independence in 1991, it was common to compare Ukraine's future to that of the richest and most advanced Western European nations: France, the UK, Germany, and Italy. Through a flawed statistical trick (by separating Soviet Ukraine from the whole of which it was an integral part) it could be presented as possessing one of Europe's largest industrial economies and

Zhuravlev (2026) offer a partially divergent interpretation of some of these interviews.

11 Two such developments are already emerging: the concentration of capital and "chaebolization" of the Russian political capitalists (Petrov, 2023) and, at the same time, a marked increase in the structural power of Russian workers tied to the war economy (Morris, 2026).

most powerful military forces. It remains questionable whether, by the late 1980s, the opportunity to advance upon that legacy had not already been lost. What is certain, however, is that breaking away from the Soviet project – not merely through formal independence, but through all the processes aimed at the intentional destruction of modern Ukraine's politico-economic and social foundations – meant abandoning any future among the developed nations.

By the 1990s, these ambitions were already considerably tempered. The new lodestars were the Visegrád Group, with the Ukrainian maidans envisioned as our belated 1989 giving a chance to catch up with a successful transition to the EU and NATO. The actual result, however, was not following the path of Poland, but rather fueling the Polish economy with millions of cheap Ukrainian laborers. Even more ironically, since the 2000s, our Western neighbors, these supposed showcases of transition, have been converging, first gradually and then rapidly, in crucial aspects of their political regimes with our archenemy: Putinist Russia (Ishchenko & Kalb, 2026; Szelényi, 2015). Orbán, Fico, Babiš, Kaczyński – these leaders and their parties may suffer electoral defeats, but their "illiberal" politics meets a powerful social demand growing even more as the crisis of the US-centered order and the EU, in particular, escalates, and so they will return to power, and with an even more explicit anti-Ukrainian agenda as in Poland.

With the onset of full-scale war, Ukraine's plausible futures were downgraded even further. A widely circulated analysis published in May 2025 by JPMorgan Chase's Center for Geopolitics epitomized this shift, outlining four scenarios: "South Korea," "Belarus," "Israel," and "Georgia," none of which, notably, presumed NATO membership anymore.[12] While the "Belarus" scenario (Russia turning Ukraine into a vassal state) and the "South Korea" model (European troops protecting Ukraine under U.S. guarantees) were deemed the least likely, the "Israel" and, especially, the "Georgia" were considered more probable outcomes.

The "Israel" model has been invoked throughout the full-scale war by Ukraine's most prominent figures, including President Zelensky and Generals Zaluzhny and Budanov, as a desirable outcome in the absence of full integration into EU and NATO structures. In fact, this idea predates the war; many in Ukraine's pro-Western political camp have long admired Israel as a strong, militaristic, and ethnonationalist state on the frontier of "Western civilization," one that ruthlessly defends its interests against hostile neighbors as well as the "dangerous," too "Eastern," population on its own territory. An "Eastern European Israel" is, in effect, a description of the function Ukraine is expected to play for the European Union: an outsourced defense against Russia. One can recall the term *foederati*, which in the late Roman empire designated "barbarian" tribes allowed to settle within imperial borders precisely to protect the empire from other "barbarians." Failing to become a nation-state striving to represent the common interests of the people living within the borders inherited from Soviet Ukraine, Ukraine may eventually be transformed into a "function-state" that serves the interests of a particular fraction of European elites. In this vision, it matters little who exactly performs the function: the very definition of "Ukrainian" will be redefined accordingly, excluding – perhaps even formally, through the deprivation of citizenship or disenfranchisement – those who do not fit the function, whether they find themselves beyond Ukraine's shrinking borders or within them. Conversely, it will include those willing to serve the "Israeli" function, however indifferent they may be to the Ukrainian culture that was ostensibly at stake in this war.

Yet, setting aside the profound ethical and political implications of identifying with Israel, such a future would require massive investment, both to build a military-industrial complex capable of matching Russian capacities and simply to stem the demographic hemorrhage of the war years, while attracting millions of migrant workers and soldiers to a depopulated and devastated land. Develop-

12 "The Russia-Ukraine Endgame and the Future of Europe," Center for Geopolitics, JPMorgan Chase, May 2025, https://www.jpmorganchase.com/content/dam/jpmorganchase/documents/center-for-geopolitics/jpmc-cfg-russia-ukraine.pdf.

mental states on the frontiers of the Cold War were possible during the high-growth era of democratic capitalism – South Korea being a prime example. Whether this remains feasible today is an open question, not only because of sheer economic constraints, but because maintaining the political unity of European elites has grown increasingly difficult in the face of mounting domestic backlash against the costs of the war and militarization.

The "Georgian scenario," by contrast, is precisely what the comprador "civil society" has vocally feared ever since Zelensky's landslide victory. Like Ukraine, Georgia experienced its own maidan revolution in 2003, followed by a war with Russia in 2008 after attempting to retake secessionist South Ossetia, events precipitated by the notorious Bucharest summit decision that offered a vague "future in NATO" to both countries. The Georgian Dream government, which replaced post-revolutionary President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2012, has not abandoned the goal of European integration but has nevertheless cracked down on its own pro-Western camp and "civil society," passing foreign agent legislation and suppressing opposition protests in 2024 despite intense EU pressure. The "Georgia" outcome is a "revolt of the elites," establishing a Caesarist rule independent of both the comprador "civil society" and transnational capital. Often accused of being a "pro-Russian" shift, it is more accurately viewed as part of the local political capitalists' "sovereigntist" balancing act between great powers amid the disintegration of the US-centered order (Gigantino, 2024). This is precisely what Ukrainian elites, plagued by political fragmentation and short-sightedness, failed to sustain before the catastrophic events of 2014. While their ability to execute such a strategy now remains far from certain, it may become unavoidable if, as a result of the war, Russia emerges strengthened, the West grows more divided, and the global order continues its shift toward multipolarity, or even China-centered hegemony.

As Ukraine's horizons darken, even "something like Israel" or "something like Georgia" begins to look optimistic compared to the grimmer precedents now looming. The specter of Syria or Libya, echoing the most disastrous trajectories of the Arab Spring deficient revolutions, has haunted Ukraine since the first outbreaks of violence in central Kyiv during the Euromaidan. It now represents a plausible future should both "Western" and "Eastern" stabilization efforts fail amid the coming global chaos. This is the prospect of a failed state: a government in Kyiv controlling only fragments of its territory, while large swathes remain occupied by neighboring powers or fall under the *de facto* control of radical movements rather than any recognized state authority. The 3rd Army Corps and the expanding ecosystem of connected military units, paramilitary movements, and civic organizations of the extreme-right "Azov movement," thoroughly whitewashed and glorified in both the Ukrainian and Western public spheres (Golinkin, 2023; Havryshko, 2026) are increasingly positioned to become the Ukrainian equivalent of "moderate democratic Islamists" of Ahmed al-Sharaa (who led the organization that used to be the Al-Qaeda branch in Syria), who is now consolidating control over his country after fifteen years of a labyrinthine civil war. Western liberal rule at the core, even at the high point of post-WWII democratic capitalism, has typically relied on dictatorships and brutal violence on the periphery. Now, as liberal order is unravelling at the core itself, "centrist" elites are growing ever more willing to embrace authoritarian practices and obscurantist ideologies in a desperate bid to preserve their power.

Moving further down the regressive path, with expectations about the future in deflationary freefall, the minerals deal imposed last year by Donald Trump on Zelensky, the full details of which remain undisclosed to the Ukrainian public, points toward what we might call the "Congo," or more precisely, the "Katanga" scenario. Katanga was the mineral-rich Congolese province whose short-lived secession in the early 1960s was engineered by Belgian mining corporations and mercenaries to preserve their grip on copper and cobalt deposits after formal decolonization. What this scenario describes for Ukraine is not a failed state like Syria (though the two may well coexist), but rather a captured extractive state: a resource colony where political sovereignty is formally maintained but functionally

hollowed out to service the aggressive extraction of critical minerals and the exploitation of remaining profitable infrastructure. In this plausible future, US corporations backed by private military contractors, rather than official "peacekeepers," would secure direct access to Ukraine's resources, bypassing the need for a functioning nation-state altogether. This is the naked commercialization of territory, in which profitable zones become securitized islands amid a sea of social abandonment. In such a future, Ukraine is not a frontier shield but a distressed asset to be liquidated in the strategic resource competition against US rivals.

As the world descends deeper into crisis, seeking Ukraine's future in the mirror of known "models" or "scenarios" may be altogether futile. Curiously, JPMorgan Chase's updated 2026 forecast suddenly named the "Finnish scenario" – ceding territory to Russia while keeping a Western orientation and eventually joining the EU and possibly, in the very long term, even NATO – as the most likely outcome for Ukraine.[13] That this should count as an optimistic scenario, when Ukraine's "finlandization" had for years been denounced as "capitulation" by the country's own "Western" camp, also manifests the regressive trajectory. What is becoming an even graver question is whether any future at all remains possible. Further global political fragmentation is an existential threat to all of humanity, whether through the rising risk of nuclear war or the failure of international coordination to avert climate catastrophe. The escalating crisis demands a response: either a new hegemonic order imposed by the ruling classes from above, or a counterhegemonic revolution brought from below, or perhaps a new mutually amplifying cycle of both.

Yet the immediate imperative is survival. For Ukraine to have *any* future, it must first endure the present. This necessity extends far beyond its own borders, resonating with all the wretched of the earth who suffer from the unwinding spiral of crisis far more acutely than those above them. Amidst the deepening catastrophe, the priority must be saving lives and preserving what remains of the country's shattered infrastructure, for without this human and physical foundation no future can take root. No Russian regime is eternal, no American presidency is permanent, and the European Union is certainly not immune to decay and disintegration. To preserve what we still have is not an act of resignation but of defiance: holding the ground for a revival when the storms of this interregnum finally break. The question, ultimately, is not which Ukraine we will become, but whether we can endure long enough to once again define that answer for ourselves.

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13 "Ukraine Endgame: The Path to an Imperfect Peace," Center for Geopolitics, JPMorgan Chase, May 2025, https://www.jpmorganchase.com/content/dam/jpmorganchase/documents/center-for-geopolitics/jmpc-cfg-ukraine-report.pdf.

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