Taking Ukraine Seriously: On the Obstacles to Asking Why

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Following much of the contemporary academic and political debate on Ukraine, one quickly discovers that the only ideologically acceptable answer to the question "What has gone wrong in Ukraine?" is: Russia. It is not only the war itself that is analyzed exclusively through the lens of Russian imperialism – though this framing crowds out diverging accounts so insistently, that over four hundred prominent scholars of East European Studies have called to "read *less* about Ukrainian domestic politics and international relations" in order to "understand the sources of the Russo-Ukrainian War."[1] Ukraine's domestic problems and international relations, too, are often attributed to Russia across different registers: corruption at the highest levels of government is framed as a Soviet institutional legacy; criticism of domestic policy is dismissed as Kremlin narrative; Russophone Ukrainian citizens are described as victims of Russification; and even disputes with neighboring Poland over historical memory are not rarely attributed to Moscow's manipulation rather than to the unresolved complexities of a shared past and present of two neighboring states. The claim of Russia's responsibility over Ukrainian problems extends far into history – the most expansive accounts locate the original breaking point in the times of Kyivan Rus – and spreads across every domain of analysis, functioning as an ontological premise underlying the dominant explanatory framework for what Ukraine as a state and society is.

Yet, this argument is much more theologically than scholarly grounded – not because it is always false, but because questioning it is often treated less as an intellectual disagreement than as an act of heresy. To put it another way, treating Russia as a totalizing explanatory category for the state of Ukrainian affairs does not pass the falsifiability test. In Popperian terms,[2] what distinguishes scientific knowledge from metaphysics, religion, or ideology is not the accumulation of confirming evidence, but the methodological and empirical possibility of refutation. Doubt, thus, is not a failure of commitment; it is the engine of inquiry. Accordingly, attributing whatever and whenever has happened in Ukraine entirely to Russian influence is analytically weak and intellectually lazy, as it substitutes causal investigation with an unfalsifiable explanatory principle. Doing so forecloses the very questions that scholarship must ask. Therefore, in seeking an answer to the question "Has anything gone wrong in Ukraine?" – and if so, what – I believe it is necessary to begin by explaining why it is legitimate to pose such a question in the first place, especially within the context of academic debate.

The first explanation is scholarly. A basic premise of social research demands defining a research object, placing it at the center of inquiry, and maintaining a critical stance toward it.[3] To study a state and society seriously means to subject them to scrutiny: to question assumptions, test competing hypotheses, and remain open to conclusions that may prove uncomfortable or politically inconvenient. Neglecting these principles means replacing research with either apologia or condemnation. Not only as a scholar, but much more as a Kharkivite, I am well aware of Russia's crimes and of its role in the destruction of life in Ukraine – I have witnessed them with my own eyes and lived through them. These crimes and the broader dynamics of the Russian state, regime, army, and society must be studied critically. Without such analysis, what is happening in Ukraine cannot be understood in full. At the same time, the analysis of Russian factors must not crowd out the studies of what is happening within

1 "An Elon Musk-Supported Apology for Russia's War on Ukraine," *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, 28 April 2026, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2026/04/28/8032087/.
2 Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 2005).
3 Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May, *Thinking Sociologically*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 165-80.

Ukrainian society itself. To place Ukraine at the center of inquiry is, first of all, to take seriously the interests of Ukrainians and the forces that run counter to them. Its study, while necessarily attentive to the broader context – namely, to the role of Ukraine's neighbors, partners, and other actors in bringing the state toward catastrophe – must, nevertheless, treat Ukraine as a full-fledged research object. It should be asking questions about its structures, dynamics, and historical trajectories in order to contribute to debates about its future – especially if we want this future to meaningfully differ from the present.

Inevitably, this research agenda carries a direct political implication: to regard Ukraine as a sovereign and independent state necessarily means recognizing its capacity for political agency, both domestically and internationally. To explain all of Ukraine's difficulties exclusively through the actions of the Kremlin is, implicitly, to deny that agency: to portray Ukraine as largely incapable of shaping its own trajectory, as an object of geopolitical competition rather than a subject of its own history. Sovereignty, however, implies not only power, influence, and the capacity to make decisions, but also responsibility for the choices made and their consequences.[4] If Ukraine is to be taken seriously as a political subject, its choices and their outcomes must be subject to the same analytical scrutiny applied to any other sovereign state. It is from this position – taking Ukraine seriously as both an object of inquiry and a subject of politics – that this essay proceeds. And it is from this position that it becomes impossible to overlook the fact that something has gone profoundly wrong in Ukraine.

Re-Defining State and Nation

A closer look at Ukraine's internal development shows that the country today lags behind what it was in the early years of independence in many respects. The origins of this decline predate the war of 2022 and lie in the way the state and the nation were rebuilt after the collapse of the USSR. Even before the Russian invasion, Ukraine had become one of the poorest countries in Europe, with a GDP per capita of 4775 USD in 2021, lagging behind most of the European and even other post-Soviet states.[5] It has been increasingly integrated into the periphery of the capitalist world-system, characterized by economic dependency, weak state institutions, political instability, and social polarization.[6] Yet, thirty-five years ago, Ukraine entered the period of independence under relatively favorable conditions. The state possessed a developed industrial sector, vast agricultural resources, and an infrastructural network that sustained the social reproduction of a population of 52 million.[7] The society of independent Ukraine emerged as a product of Soviet modernity – an urbanized and educated entity, shaped by industrial development and substantial opportunities for social mobility, marked regional differentiation, and wide ethnic diversity.[8] Unlike some other Soviet republics, Ukraine's exit from the Soviet Union, from the perspective of the 1990s and 2000s, appeared peaceful.

These favorable conditions, however, did not translate into the outcomes they seemed to promise. Independence has launched the process of reimagining the state and the nation simultaneously, and redefining how and by whom the resources inherited from the Soviet state would be managed.

4 Alan James, "The Practice of Sovereign Statehood in Contemporary International Society," *Political Studies* 47, no. 3 (1999): 457-73.

5 World Bank, "GDP per Capita (Current US$) – Ukraine," World Bank Open Data, NY.GDP.PCAP.CD, accessed 10 July 2026, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=UA.

6 Andrii Maliuk, "Trajectory of Socio-Economic Development of Ukraine in 1991-2021 from a World-System Perspective," *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 11, no. 1 (2025): 292.

7 Anders Åslund, *How Ukraine Became a Market Economy and Democracy* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009); Robert S. Kravchuk, *Ukrainian Political Economy: The First Ten Years* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); A. I. Amosha, N. E. Briukhovetskaia, and I. P. Buleev, "O vosstanovlenii vedushchei roli mashinostroeniia v postroenii novoi ekonomiki Ukrainy," *Ekonomichnyi visnyk Donbasu*,64, no. 2 (2021): 94-107.

8 Georgiy Kasianov, *Memory Crash: The Politics of History in and around Ukraine, 1980s-2010s* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022), 387-98.

The processes which are often analyzed as state-building and nation-building[9] had not started from scratch and were transforming a previously formed Soviet Ukrainian state and nation. The concept of a nation-state centered on the titular nation replaced the universalist Soviet project, and a multiethnic population had to be brought into alignment with a coherent national and cultural identity.[10] This objective was pursued so vigorously that national rebuilding often outpaced, and at times undermined, the development of stable state institutions. As Åslund observed, in the first years of independence "Ukraine focused on little but nation-building," elevating it into an "all-dominant priority."[11]

Simultaneously, and under sustained pressure from international financial institutions, Ukraine implemented a neoliberal economic program. Unlike most other Soviet republics, Ukraine had not managed to restore the country's economy to its 1990 level by 2021.[12] Additionally, the economy has undergone a reorientation: entire high-tech subbranches, such as aircraft building, heavy and power engineering, rocket and space technology, ceased to exist; the share of high-tech industries diminished.[13] Industry's share of gross value added fell from 54.6 percent in 1991 to 23.2 percent in 2021,[14] and what remained was an economy reoriented toward raw material exports, dependent on imported components, and built on a low-wage labor regime as its primary competitive advantage[15] – a trajectory that Guzhva and Honcharenko describe as the "primitivization" of the Ukrainian economy.[16]

These economic transformations produced a radical restructuring of the social landscape. Through the redistribution of state property along nomenklatura-criminal networks, a small oligarchic class emerged that concentrated productive assets in its hands while the broader population absorbed the costs.[17] In mid-1995, the World Bank found 29.5 percent of Ukrainian households below the poverty line.[18] The commodity boom of the 2000s produced a sharp decline in absolute poverty – from 32 percent in 2001 to under 8 percent in 2005 by the World Bank's own basic-needs line.[19] The following decade largely undid the gains, while the war in Donbas and the 2014-2015 economic crisis pushed the share of the population below the subsistence minimum from 17 to 52 percent in a single year.[20] Three decades later, after a partial recovery and then the Russian invasion, the World Bank estimates that 41.6 percent of the population lived below the national subsistence line in 2025, roughly double the rate of 2021.[21] Moreover, throughout the years, the welfare state has been progressively dismantled through reforms of education (2017, 2026), healthcare (2017, 2020), and pensions (2011, 2017).

9 Mikhail Minakov, "Istoriia i svoboda na vostoke Evropy: K osmysleniiu postsovetskogo perioda," *Palladium*, no. 6 (2023), https://freeuniversity.pubpub.org/pub/p6-01/release/1.

10 Rogers Brubaker, "Nationalizing States Revisited: Projects and Processes of Nationalization in Post-Soviet States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 11 (2011): 1785-1814.

11 Åslund, *How Ukraine Became a Market Economy*, xii.

12 World Bank, "GDP (Constant 2015 US$) – Ukraine," World Bank Open Data, indicator NY.GDP.MKTP.KD, accessed 10 July 2026, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD?locations=UA.

13 Maliuk, "Trajectory of Socio-Economic Development," 299-300.

14 Maliuk, "Trajectory of Socio-Economic Development," 300.

15 Maliuk, "Trajectory of Socio-Economic Development," 293.

16 Ihor Guzhva and Kyrylo Honcharenko, "Industry of Ukraine: Current Trends and Factors of Development," *Market Relations Development in Ukraine*, no. 1 (224) (2020): 18-24 [in Ukrainian].

17 Oleksandr Baranovs'kyi and Volodymyr Sidenko, "Problemy vlasnosti ta lehalizatsii kapitaliv i dokhodiv v Ukraini," *Natsional'na bezpeka i oborona*, no. 2 (50) (2004): 2-13.

18 World Bank, *Poverty in Ukraine*, Report no. 15602-UA (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1996), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/413691468779375547/pdf/multi-page.pdf

19 World Bank, *Ukraine Poverty Update*, Report no. 39887-UA (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007), 6-7, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b933fd79-81a6-5bc0-afe4-5b7024917c39/content.

20 World Bank, *Ukraine Poverty and Shared Prosperity Update, 2016-2019* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021), 2-6, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099430006232220098/pdf/P17204608594930609d8f08307fb5dd1ed.pdf.

21 World Bank, *Monitoring Living Conditions in Ukraine: Spring 2026 Update*, Listening to Ukraine (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2026), 3, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/3df3ca7530237868137cf8a73f9b36b2-0080062026/original/Listening-to-Ukraine-Update-Spring-2026.pdf.

The rebuilding of the state and the nation produced a specific "division of labor."[22] The former Soviet nomenklatura engaged far more closely with the rebuilding of the state and the division of its assets than with questions of national identity, leaving the symbolic sphere largely to cultural elites, former dissidents and nationalist activists. Nevertheless, rebuilding of the Ukrainian nation proceeded rapidly and took a prominent place in public debate. So, what kind of nation was being built? The model on which this project drew from the onset was, in important respects, a nineteenth-century one applied to a society on the brink of the twenty-first century. It was based on a narrative of an agrarian nation marked by low social mobility, limited literacy, and thin channels of social communication. Aligned with nineteenth-century ethnocultural nationalism, this narrative identified the nation with the ethnos – an ethnocultural, linguistic, and religious community.[23] The history of the Ukrainian nation relied on the imaginary preserved in the diasporic communities[24] that framed it as "a never-ending chain of suffering, hardship, struggle for survival, and an eternal yearning for national self-determination."[25] The attainment of independence was viewed as a triumph of historical justice, achieved through a return to the traditions of the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic. The Russian empire and the USSR were viewed as external forces that had forcibly drawn Ukraine into their orbit, while the participation of Ukrainians in the creation, maintenance, and development of both states was "at best, resolved by contrasting the 'merits and feats of individual people' with the 'evil of the Soviet empire'"[26] or not discussed at all. The existence of the Ukrainian nation was traced back to Kyivan Rus as an early form of statehood and further back to the early tribal forms of social organization, which made it possible to speak of a thousand-year-old Ukrainian nation.

In the early years, the realization of this project on a political level unfolded in the form of civic nationalism – a model promoted throughout the 1990s as the normative destination of post-communist transition[27] – which conceives of the nation as a community united by loyalty to the nation-state and formally encompassing all ethnic groups. As a result, the primordialist conception of the nation that underpinned state memory politics was able to coexist with the forms of memory shared by representatives of different ethnic groups, regions, and social classes, without guiding political decisions. Moreover, state control over memory was rather limited and inconsistent, and issues regarding symbols and rituals were resolved at the level of regional authorities.[28] This early flexibility was also enabled by a deeper continuity: independent Ukraine remained, in many respects, continuous with the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.[29] The symbolic change – flags, anthems, currency, street names – took place while the property, territories, and statuses, like UN membership, of the Ukrainian SSR remained unchanged. Most Soviet laws remained in force, most Soviet functionaries retained their positions, even many rituals were still in place, and the whole civil, critical, and industrial infrastructure remained in the country. Nationalism at this stage was instrumental: it helped former Soviet elites legitimize their rule, maintain their careers, and benefit from the ongoing redistribution of capital, while simultaneous-

22 Georgiy Kasianov, "Ukraine as a 'Nationalizing State': A Review of Practices and Outcomes," *Sociology of Power* 33, no. 2 (2021): 121 [in Russian].
23 Kasianov, *Memory Crash*, 213-47.
24 Per A. Rudling, "Repatriating an Edifying Past: The Diaspora Ukrainian Authoritarian Right and Power over Memory, 1991-2021," *Nationalities Papers* 52, no. 6 (2024): 1308-31.
25 Kasianov, *Memory Crash*, 213.
26 Andrii Portnov, "Uprazhneniia s istoriei po-ukrainski (Zametki ob obshchestvennykh izmereniiakh funktsionirovaniia istorii v postsovetskoi Ukraine)," *Ab Imperio* 2007, no. 3: 93-102.
27 Matthew Blackburn, "The Persistence of the Civic-Ethnic Binary: Competing Visions of the Nation and Civilization in Western, Central and Eastern Europe," *National Identities* 24, no. 5 (2022): 468, https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2021.2006169.
28 Portnov, "Uprazhneniia s istoriei po-ukrainski," 94.
29 Artem Lytovchenko and Olena Muradyan, "Preconditions for Regional Divisions in Ukraine and the Global Implications of the Ukrainian Crisis," in *Uluslararası Politikada Ukrayna Krizi*, ed. Hasret Çomak, Caner Sancaktar, and Zafer Yıldırım (Istanbul: Beta, 2014), 37-38.

ly serving as a lever of foreign policy, deployed strategically when needed.[30]

Over time, this pragmatic construction was filled with increasingly ethnonational content, as the former Soviet nomenklatura was trying to preserve operational control over state assets, and nationalist activists and dissidents were focused on managing the symbolic sphere. The primary criterion of inclusion became adherence to a particular and narrow conception of Ukrainian culture, language, identity, and vision of the past. Over time, memory legislation became the central mechanism through which this narrowing was institutionalized. At first, memory laws identified the historical moments the state deemed worthy of commemoration – for example, World War II[31] and the Holodomor;[32] then they prescribed how and whom to remember – for example, through the heroization of Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych,[33] or by adopting the law on the fighters for Ukraine's independence,[34] and, in their most extreme form, began to prescribe criminal penalties for violations.[35] Ethnic nationalism did not replace the civic variant but came to coexist with it and reinforce it, extending the requirements of national conformity beyond language and culture and increasingly ideologizing the category of the nation itself. Thus, the space for imagining and discussing what the Ukrainian nation might look like was constantly narrowing, while the image of the nation was increasingly regulated from above.

Yet whether the criterion of belonging was cultural and linguistic or political and value-based, both variants drew the same kind of boundary,[36] and both operated as a "form of knowledge,"[37] perceiving the social world exclusively through national categories and rendering other cleavages, such as class, regional belonging, language, and generation, secondary or invisible. Exactly in this fashion, Ukrainian nationalism, whatever its civic or ethnic inflection, was structurally ill-equipped to represent the society it claimed to speak for. Surveys conducted throughout the years of independence showed with remarkable regularity that questions of language, culture, and the past occupied the bottom of these rankings. For instance, in 2001, 76 percent of Ukrainians prioritised the population's standard of living as a matter of concern, while only around 5 percent pointed to the status of the Russian and Ukrainian languages and 8 percent to the revival of the Ukrainian nation.[38] Such distributions are unremarkable in themselves: material concerns outrank symbolic ones in survey data across most countries, including those under no economic strain at all. What distinguishes the Ukrainian case is not the ranking, but what it corresponded to. Elsewhere, the priority attached to living standards registers a stable

30 Mikhail A. Molchanov, "Post-Communist Nationalism as a Power Resource: A Russia-Ukraine Comparison," *Nationalities Papers* 28, no. 2 (2000): 276-279.

31 Zakon Ukrainy "Pro uvichnennia Peremohy u Velykii Vitchyznianii viini 1941-1945 rokiv," no. 1684-III, 20 April 2000, *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy*, 2000, no. 30, art. 239; repealed 21 May 2015 by law no. 315-VIII, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1684-14. Zakon Ukrainy "Pro uvichnennia peremohy nad natsyzmom u Druhii svitovii viini 1939-1945 rokiv," no. 315-VIII, 9 April 2015, *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy*, 2015, no. 25, art. 191.

32 Zakon Ukrainy "Pro Holodomor 1932-1933 rokiv v Ukraini," no. 376-V, 28 November 2006, *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy*, 2006, no. 50, art. 504.

33 Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy "Pro prysvoiennia R. Shukhevychu zvannia Heroi Ukrainy," no. 965/2007, 12 October 2007, https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/9652007-6491; annulled by a court ruling on the grounds that the title may be conferred only on citizens of Ukraine. Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy "Pro prysvoiennia S. Banderi zvannia Heroi Ukrainy," no. 46/2010, 20 January 2010, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/46/2010; annulled by a court ruling in 2011 on the grounds that the title may be conferred only on citizens of Ukraine.

34 Zakon Ukrainy "Pro pravovyi status ta vshanuvannia pam"iati bortsiv za nezalezhnist' Ukrainy u XX stolitti," no. 314-VIII, 9 April 2015, *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy*, 2015, no. 25, art. 190, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/314-19/ed20150409.

35 Zakon Ukrainy "Pro zasudzhennia komunistychnoho ta natsional-sotsialistychnoho (natsysts'koho) totalitarnykh rezhymiv v Ukraini ta zaboronu propahandy ikh'noi symvoliky," no. 317-VIII, 9 April 2015, Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy, 2015, no. 26, art. 219, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/317-19/ed20150409.

36 Oleg Zhuravlev and Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Exclusiveness of Civic Nationalism: Euromaidan Eventful Nationalism in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36, no. 3 (2020): 226-45.

37 Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 18.

38 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, "Dumky ta pohliady naselennia Ukrainy, sichen' 2001 roku," 17 January 2001, section "Sotsial'no-politychni oriientatsii," https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=252&y=2001&m=1&page=1.

background preference; here it tracked a documented economic collapse and impoverishment on a mass scale over the same period. The symbolic agenda dominated regardless of popular demand and economic data. Thus, the nineteenth-century Ukrainian national imaginary appeared incommensurable with the material and social aspirations of the society it governed – a modern society that had sought independence not as an end in itself, but as a condition for improving its living standards and expanding its life chances.[39]

From Exclusion to Erasure: Defining the Limits of National Belonging

If the early period of independence established nation-building as the dominant public agenda, the post-Euromaidan period accelerated investment in the symbolic sphere, through which Ukrainian nation-building shifted from the attempt to rebuild a Ukrainian nation to the attempt to define normatively who belongs to it. Anti-communism and the progressive restriction of the Russian language have become prominent institutional instruments through which an increasingly narrow conception of Ukrainian national belonging has been legally enforced. In the 2010s, neither Russia nor the Anti-Maidan advanced a communist project, yet both deployed Soviet symbols in the course of that conflict. It was this appropriation, rather than any living communist politics, that supplied the occasion for banning those symbols in Ukraine itself. The dismantling of Soviet monuments, the renaming of toponyms, the outlawing of the Communist Party, the decommunization legislation, and the repeal of the earlier language law together constituted a form of symbolic mobilization whose consequences for Ukrainian society were anything but symbolic. In doing so, Ukraine belatedly joined the anti-communist memory regime that had emerged across Eastern Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s during the period of the European Union enlargement. Understanding what this regime was, and how Ukrainian anti-communism both resembled and departed from it, is essential to understanding what followed.

A growing body of scholarship[40] on anti-communism as a framework of memory politics in post-socialist states suggests that it is best understood not as a self-evident reckoning with a traumatic past but as a struggle for power attempting to establish the regime of truth. This regime simultaneously defines how the past should be remembered, what political positions are legitimate in the present, and what futures are imaginable. As Zombory has shown,[41] Eastern European anti-communism was the outcome of a structural exchange that took place during the accession of the Eastern European countries into the EU. Whereas postwar Western European memory had been organized around the Holocaust and the crimes of fascism, Eastern Europe supplemented this framework with a second foundational trauma, the crimes of communism, positioning itself as the double victim of both regimes. In this process, Eastern Europe brought communism and a claim to victim status as its specific historical experience, while Western European institutions codified that narrative.[42] Thus, "EU enlargement appeared as a

39 David R. Marples, "Ukraine's Drive to Independence in 1991," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 61, no. 3 (2019): 321-45.

40 See Máté Zombory, "The Anti-Communist Moment: Competitive Victimhood in European Politics," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 51, no. 2-3 (2020): 21-54, https://doi.org/10.3917/receo1.512.0021; Zoltán Dujisin, "A History of Post-Communist Remembrance: From Memory Politics to the Emergence of a Field of Anticommunism," *Theory and Society* 50, no. 1 (2021): 65-96, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09401-5; Berthold Molden, "Mnemonic Hegemony? The Power Relations of Contemporary European Memory," in *EUtROPEs: The Paradox of European Empire*, ed. John W. Boyer and Berthold Molden, Cahiers Parisiens 7 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 104-30; Jelena Đureinović, "Beyond the State Agency: Anti-Communist Memory Work in Post-Milošević Serbia," in *Researching Memory and Identity in Russia and Eastern Europe: Interdisciplinary Methodologies*, ed. Jade McGlynn and Oliver T. Jones (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 183-97, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99914-8_11; Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

41 Máté Zombory, "The Anti-Communist Moment."

42 Georgiy Kasianov, "Istorychna polityka ta ontolohichna bezpeka: kontseptual'ni ramky ta analitychni sposterezhennia," *Intermarum: istoriia, polityka, kul'tura*, no. 17 (2025): 19; Dujisin, "A History of Post-Communist Remembrance."

process of integration through which continental civilization was reunited according to its supposedly universal values." [43] The memory of communism was thus canonized primarily as a memory of terror, repression, and victimhood, even as everyday recollections in post-socialist states remained considerably more ambivalent, combining memories of hardship with memories of social security, modernization, and collective advancement.[44]

Ukraine entered this field under rather different conditions. In Eastern European states anti-communism was legitimized through the accession process to European structures. Ukrainian anti-communism, in turn, declared to have been following the path of its Western neighbors, but attained legitimacy through the revolutionary impulses of the Euromaidan and the mobilizing effects of war. As a result, Ukrainian anti-communism became simultaneously less consensual and more uncompromising. Public opinion surveys repeatedly demonstrated that decommunization enjoyed only limited support – in November 2016, only 35 percent of respondents supported renaming settlements and streets, while 57 percent opposed it, with a clear regional divide: support was 63 percent in Western Ukraine, 32 percent in Central Ukraine, 19 percent in the South, and 18 percent in the East;[45] the ban of communist ideology enjoyed larger support, with, however, similar regional distribution trends.[46]. Simultaneously, local authorities frequently sabotaged the implementation of decommunization,[47] while scholars[48] and the Venice commission at the Council of Europe[49] also criticized the decision. Nevertheless, a vast institutional infrastructure emerged around this project: the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, legislative mechanisms, educational reforms, cultural institutions, media initiatives, and civil society organizations. Activists who had acquired revolutionary legitimacy through the Maidan and gained sufficient influence over parliamentary decisions succeeded in pushing through an anti-communist agenda, presenting it simultaneously as a mechanism of democratization and an instrument of national consolidation, referencing Eastern European states as a role model. In practice, however, Ukrainian anti-communism differed from its Eastern European precedents both in timing and scale. Across Central and Eastern Europe, the reckoning with the communist past had concentrated on functionaries and the institutions they had staffed: lustration was almost always confined to the public sector, party officials were generally subject to proceedings only where they had collaborated with the security services or could be charged with criminal offences, and blanket rejection of all former functionaries was largely absent.[50] That transitional-justice moment had passed two decades before Ukrainian decommunization started. The second, symbolic wave was by then receding as well: Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, and Poland had all restricted communist symbols, but criminal liability survived in only a handful of jurisdictions, most states having shifted to administrative penalties.[51] Ukraine moved against this current, criminalizing the production, dissemination, and public use of communist symbols with penalties

43 Máté Zombory, "The Anti-Communist Moment," 36.

44 Berthold Molden, "Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony: On the Power Relations of Collective Memory," *Memory Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 126, https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015596014.

45 Rating Group, "Attitude toward Certain Historical Figures and De-Communization Process in Ukraine," 17 November 2016, https://www.ratinggroup.ua/en/news/otnoshenie-k-otdelnym-istoricheskim-lichnostyam-i-processu-dekommunizacii-v-ukraine.

46 Rating Group, "Attitude toward Certain Historical Figures and De-Communization Process in Ukraine."

47 UNIAN, "Prystrasti za dekomunizatsiyeyu," 2 June 2016, https://www.unian.ua/society/1363662-pristrasti-za-dekomunizatsieyu.html.

48 David R. Marples, "Open Letter from Scholars and Experts on Ukraine Re. the So-Called 'Anti-Communist Law,'" *Krytyka*, April 2015.

49 Venice Commission, *Joint Interim Opinion on the Law of Ukraine on the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Regimes and Prohibition of Propaganda of Their Symbols*, CDL-AD(2015)041-e (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2015), https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/216281.

50 Helga A. Welsh, "Dealing with the Communist Past: Central and East European Experiences after 1990," *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 3 (1996).

51 Georgiy Kasianov, "'To Discipline and Punish': A Punitive Turn in the Memory Politics in Ukraine, 2006-2025," *Memory Studies* (2026): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980261460344.

of up to five years imprisonment, rising to ten for officials, repeat offenders, and those acting through the media. Kasianov points to another pattern: legal repression fell disproportionately on marginalized populations.[52] Between 2015 and 2021, 334 criminal cases under Article 436-1 "The production and distribution of communist and Nazi symbols, and the propaganda of communist and National Socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes" were initiated, with 24 obtained convictions; between 2022 and mid-2025 the corresponding figures grew to 896 and 307. Of the 279 convictions in the later period for which the courts recorded social status, 124 were of the unemployed or informally employed, 84 of pensioners, and 23 of persons with disabilities; the remainder were people of low-skilled occupations, most with secondary or vocational education.[53] The offences involved a hoodie bearing "USSR," a flag carried through a city in the hope of selling it, a postcard handed to another person, and, in at least twenty-one instances, the act of liking someone else's post.[54] This situation opens up a further question: why should a law framed as a defense against external aggression have found its subjects among the unemployed, the retired, and the disabled? Therefore, it is not the severity of the sanctions alone, but their class dimension that becomes visible under a closer examination.

The anti-communist consensus inscribed into the memory politics of Eastern European states created a rhetorical "trap": once anti-communism becomes synonymous with democracy, freedom, and Europeanness, questioning its assumptions becomes exceedingly difficult. Opposition is no longer treated as political disagreement but as evidence of moral deficiency, and anti-communism becomes a universal precondition for legitimate participation in public life. This condition affects all temporal dimensions simultaneously. In relation to the past, memory legislation prescribed normative interpretations of the Soviet period, condemning communism, framing it as external and imposed upon Ukraine, and criminalizing its symbols. In relation to the present, this narrowed the spectrum of available political positions, limited political participation, restricted oppositional politics, as well as curtailed the representational possibilities of significant social groups. In relation to the future, anti-communism foreclosed the very horizon of imaginable alternatives. It appropriated and redefined the category of revolution itself: celebrating Euromaidan as a progressive revolution, it elevated popular mobilization as the defining feature of revolutionary action while rendering its socially transformative content secondary. Meanwhile, the idea of social revolution in its emancipatory sense was archived, as Traverso has argued, "in the 'totalitarianism' chapter in the history of the twentieth century"[55] and labelled criminal. By constitutionally enshrining the aspirations of EU integration and NATO accession, lawmakers outlined a Ukrainian future in which social-revolutionary transformation had no place. Any attempt to challenge post-socialist neoliberalism, like in other Eastern European states, was denounced in Ukraine as "ethically dangerous and unacceptable, resuscitating the ghost of totalitarianism"[56] both by the state actors and civil society. Speaking of the future in terms of class, redistribution, public ownership, or social protection shifted at best to the very margins. Any vision of social transformation extending beyond the horizon of liberal democracy and market capitalism was disqualified in advance. With it, the nation was firmly established as the primary subject of collective life, insisting on the unity of interests of all those who belonged to it.

This rhetorical "trap" is further reinforced by the logic of victimhood on which the anti-communist framework rests. As Behr et al. has shown, anti-communism triggered "the escalation of victimization

52 Kasianov, "'To Discipline and Punish,'" 16.
53 Kasianov, "'To Discipline and Punish, 14.
54 Kasianov, "'To Discipline and Punish,'"11.
55 Enzo Traverso, *Le passé, modes d'emploi: Histoire, mémoire, politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2005), 88, quoted in Máté Zombory, "The Anti-Communist Moment: Competitive Victimhood in European Politics," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 51, no. 2-3 (2020): 32.
56 Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druță, "Zombie Socialism and the Rise of Neoliberalism in Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, nos 4-5 (2016): 525-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1266273.

in historical debates"[57] – a competitive inflation of suffering claims that forecloses critical deliberation by replacing it with moral norms. Victimhood, by virtue of its association with innocence, confers moral authority: it legitimizes the actions of the victimized group while simultaneously deflecting scrutiny of its own conduct, since the victim, by definition, cannot be held responsible for the circumstances of its suffering.[58] In its most elaborated forms, victimhood shades into what has been described as victimhood nationalism, a form of nationalism built on the memory of collective suffering, in which the binary opposition between guilt and innocence becomes the primary lens through which political reality is interpreted.[59] Applied to Ukraine, this logic sees the nation foremost as a perpetual victim of external oppression – of empires, of Russification, of Soviet domination, of Russian aggression – making it structurally difficult to ask whether Ukrainian political actors themselves bear any responsibility for the country's trajectory both in the past and today. Explanations rooted in contradictory interests, political choices, or institutional failure risk appearing morally suspect as they complicate the victim narrative. It is precisely a part of this logic that making the question of what has gone wrong in Ukraine on Ukraine's own terms not merely uncomfortable but virtually illegitimate.

Anti-communism in Ukraine did not remain confined to the domain of historical memory. The fact that historically communism in Ukraine was experienced primarily through the Soviet Union made it possible to collapse the USSR in Ukrainian political discourse into a broader narrative of Russian imperial domination. Thus, the condemnation of communism frequently merged with the rejection of Russian culture and language. This conflation was also legally codified. Memory legislation and decommunization laws explicitly equate the Soviet Union, the Russian Empire, and successive forms of Russian statehood as continuous manifestations of the same imperial project. Thus, the question of Russian language in Ukraine has shifted away from the realm of cultural rights or administrative convenience and has been ultimately treated as a tool for maintaining and protecting the national project.

Since independence, Ukrainian language legislation in relations to Russian language has followed a clear trajectory: from permissive arrangements that accommodated the country's linguistic diversity toward increasingly restrictive regulations centered on the exclusive public dominance of Ukrainian. While the constitution formally guarantees the free development, use, and protection of Russian and minority languages, subsequent legislation progressively narrowed the practical scope of these guarantees. A decisive shift occurred after 2014: one of the first acts of the post-Maidan authorities was the repeal of the existing law on regional languages, which had granted expanded rights to languages spoken by more than 10 percent of the population in a given region. This trajectory accelerated through a series of legal and institutional changes culminating in the Law on Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language, which established Ukrainian as the obligatory language of public communication and significantly restricted the field of use for minority languages.[60] The Law on National Minorities introduced additional limitations on languages associated with states designated as aggressors or occupiers[61] – a provision that effectively targeted Russian. State institutions responsible for monitoring linguistic compliance expanded powers of supervision over public

57 Valentin Behr, Muriel Blaive, Anemona Constantin, Laure Neumayer, and Máté Zombory, "An Anti-Communist Consensus: The Black Book of Communism in Pan-European Perspective," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 51, nos. 2-3 (2020): 17, https://doi.org/10.3917/receo1.512.0055.

58 Elissa Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 4; Lilie Chouliaraki, *Wronged: Victimhood in Public Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024).

59 Jie-Hyun Lim, "Victimhood Nationalism in Contested Memories: National Mourning and Global Accountability," in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 139.

60 Zakon Ukrainy "Pro zabezpechennia funktsionuvannia ukrains'koi movy iak derzhavnoi," no. 2704-VIII, 25 April 2019, *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy*, 2019, no. 21, art. 81, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2704-19#Text.

61 Zakon Ukrainy "Pro natsional'ni menshyny (spilnoty) Ukrainy," no. 2827-IX, 13 December 2022, *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy*, 2023, no. 46, art. 114, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2827-20#Text.

language use. The process reached its conceptual conclusion in the Constitutional Court's decision of July 2021, which declared Ukrainian "the code of the nation"[62] and explicitly rejected the notion that Russian-speaking Ukrainians constitute a distinct socio-demographic group. According to the court's reasoning, Russian-speaking citizens possess sufficient command of Ukrainian and therefore do not require collective protections. Their existence was reinterpreted as a consequence of historical Russification rather than an established social reality to be accommodated.[63]

Yet this legal framework disregards the social reality it claimed to address. In 1991-94, 56.2 percent of Ukrainians identified Russian as their "most comfortable" or "preferable" language of communication – the figure rose to 81.5 percent in the South-East.[64] Euromaidan and the armed conflict of 2014 did not dramatically alter nationwide distribution of the language of everyday use.[65] Moreover, in 2015, 52 percent of Ukrainians supported granting Russian official status in regions where the majority desired it,[66] and on the eve of the full-scale invasion, "almost half of Ukrainian citizens actively used that language [Russian] primarily or on a par with Ukrainian."[67] Even in 2023, around 80 percent of residents of Odesa and Kharkiv reported Russian as the language they use at home.[68] Behind these figures stand concrete social groups that constitute a majority of the population in several regions. Having served as the lingua franca of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, Russian in Ukraine was never a minority language in the conventional sense: it was internalised as a first language not only by ethnic Russians but by a wide range of ethnic groups[69] and people of various social origin – teachers, industrial workers, students. Moreover, in the southeastern regions, this process began in the pre-Soviet era, when the settlements in the region were transforming into industrial and commercial centers of the Russian empire.

After the outbreak of the 2022 Russian invasion, legal restrictions in language use were accompanied by open stigmatization of Russian-speaking Ukrainians in public discourse. Depending on the context, these people appeared as victims of Russification who needed cultural rehabilitation, as carriers of foreign influence, as potential collaborators, as remnants of the Soviet past, or as a group that did not exist.[70].The minister of education has pointed at a "correlation" between missile strikes on Ukraine and the Russian language.[71] A columnist in the country's largest online outlet argued that "there are no Russian-speaking Ukrainians, only Russified ones," simultaneously placing on them "a

62 Rishennia Konstytutsiinoho Sudu Ukrainy u spravi za konstytutsiinym podanniam 51 narodnoho deputata Ukrainy shchodo vidpovidnosti Konstytutsii Ukrainy (konstytutsiinosti) Zakonu Ukrainy, "Pro zabezpechennia funktsionuvannia ukrains'koi movy iak derzhavnoi," no. 1-r/2021, case no. 1-179/2019(4094/19), 14 July 2021, 8, 18, https://ccu.gov.ua/sites/default/files/docs/1_p2021.pdf.

63 Oleksandr Kyselov, "How Language Is Weaponized in Wartime Ukraine," *Jacobin*, 5 September 2025, https://jacobin.com/2025/09/russian-language-ukraine-weaponized-war.

64 Volodymyr Kulyk, "Rodnoi iazyk i iazyk obshcheniia: na chto dolzhna orientirovat'sia iazykovaia politika?" *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia: Dannye. Analiz. Diskussii*, no. 3 (105) (2010): 77.

65 Volodymyr Kulyk, "Language Shift in Time of War: The Abandonment of Russian in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 40, no. 3 (2024): 165, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2024.2318141.

66 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, "Stavlennia do statusu rosiis'koi movy v Ukraini," 10 April 2015, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=517&y=2015&m=4.

67 Kulyk, "Language Shift in Time of War," 160.

68 Rating Sociological Group, *Eighth All-Ukrainian Municipal Survey, April-May 2023* (Kyiv: Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2023), 154, https://web.archive.org/web/20250317124205/https://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/municipal_survey_may_2023_ua_-_final.pdf.

69 Liudmila Kudriavtseva, "Status russkogo iazyka vs iazykovaia samoidentifikatsiia grazhdan Ukrainy," *Slovo.ru: Baltiiskii aktsent*, no. 3 (2012): 35.

70 "Kremin zaiavyv, shcho ne isnuie rosiis'komovnykh ukraintsiv," *NV*, 22 November 2023, https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/politics/taras-kremin-rozpoviv-chi-isnuye-ponyattya-rosiyskomovni-ukrajinci-50370471.html.

71 Iuliia Kharchenko, "'U takykh liudei ie problemy': Lisovyi zhorstko vyslovyvsia pro rosiis'ku movu, koly litaiut rakety," *24 Kanal*, 15 February 2026, https://24tv.ua/education/ministr-osviti-lisoviy-pro-movne-pitannya-shkolah-yak-vin-povyazav_n3010237.

share of responsibility for this war."[72] The mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk has supported the launch of language patrols to monitor Russian use in public spaces.[73] A well-known actor proposed beating children for speaking Russian; a writer called for publicly reprimanding parents of "Russified" children.[74] The current Commissioner for the Protection of the State Language went so far as to question whether people who had not switched to Ukrainian could be considered homo sapiens at all.[75] What is striking about these representations is that they assign Russian-speaking Ukrainians virtually every possible status except that of ordinary citizens capable of defining their subjectivities themselves. They may be victims, security risks, colonial subjects, or historical anomalies – what they increasingly cease to be is a segment of population whose existence can be taken for granted.

Every time I hear that Russian-speaking Ukrainians are a "political construct,"[76] I find myself wondering who exactly the people around whom I spent my entire life were. Were my parents, whose bedtime fairy tales gave me a sense of security, and my grandparents, whose accounts of their own lives gave me a sense of continuity, simply victims who had failed to realize their true identity? The teachers in my kindergarten and school or the professors at my university, who taught me to doubt, to ask questions, to be curious, to analyze and to understand, were they at least "homo sapiens"? Were my neighbors at the apartment block, who solidarily supported one another when times were hard, and my great-grandparents in the village, who lived through every upheaval of the twentieth century, nothing more than remnants of Russification? Were my friends, with whom I shared childhood secrets, first loves, and discoveries of various kinds – in Russian, always – colonized subjects unable to emancipate? Did all these people exist at all? Do I exist?

The question is not rhetorical. From a sociological perspective, what is unfolding can be understood as a movement from ontological exclusion toward erasure.[77] Exclusion presupposes the existence of a group that within a given picture of the world is denied rights, resources, or recognition. Erasure refuses to accept the very existence of the group itself. If Russophone Ukrainians do not exist, then there can be no legitimate representation of their interests, no claims-making on their behalf, and no collective grievances requiring political attention. The disappearance of the category removes the possibility of political contestation altogether: one cannot organize, or demand recognition, as a member of a group that official discourse insists is not there. This foreclosure has a determinate social address. Attachment to Russian has not disappeared since February 2022, but it has become concentrated: it persists most strongly among the working class, for whom questions of language and symbols remain "far from pressing problems."[78] What presents itself as cultural policy operates as a "social struggle on

72 Dmytro Sinchenko, "'Russkoiazychnykh ukraintsev' ne sushchestvuet. Est' tol'ko rusifitsirovannye," *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, 17 June 2022, https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/columns/2022/06/17/7352949/.

73 Vitaliia Kohuch and Andrii Harhara, "V Ivano-Frankivs'ku diiut' movni patruli - iak vykoriniuiut' movu ahresora z ukrains'kykh vulyts'," *5 Kanal*, 11 November 2024, https://www.5.ua/suspilstvo/v-ivano-frankivsku-diiut-movni-patruli-iak-vykoriniuiut-movu-ahresora-z-ukrainskykh-vulyts-338243.html.

74 Mariia Kasii, "Po sr*tsi rizkoiu vidporoty, – aktor Bohdan Beniuk zaklykav byty ditei za rosiis'ku movu," *24 Kanal*, 29 April 2025, https://24tv.ua/show24/bogdan-benyuk-zaklikav-biti-ditey-za-rosiysku-movu-zayava-aktora_n2810518.

75 "Vsi, khto vvazhaie sebe liudynoiu rozumnoiu, pereishly na ukrains'ku movu, – movna ombudsmenka," UNIAN, 5 January 2026, https://www.unian.ua/society/ukrajinska-mova-olena-ivanovska-zaklikala-ukrajinciv-pereyti-na-derzhavnu-movu-13246389.html.

76 Rishennia Konstytutsiinoho Sudu Ukrainy u spravi za konstytutsiinym podanniam 51 narodnoho deputata Ukrainy shchodo vidpovidnosti Konstytutsii Ukrainy (konstytutsiinosti) Zakonu Ukrainy "Pro zabezpechennia funktsionuvannia ukrains'koi movy iak derzhavnoi" no. 1-r/2021, case no. 1-179/2019 (4094/19), 14 July 2021, 8, 18, https://ccu.gov.ua/sites/default/files/docs/1_p2021.pdf.

77 Kevin Richardson, "Exclusion and Erasure: Two Types of Ontological Oppression," *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 23 (2023): 603-22, https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.2279.

78 Daria Saburova, "Novyi symvolichnyi poriadok: robitnychyi klas ta movne pytannia," *Spilne / Commons*, 25 December 2024, https://commons.com.ua/uk/robitnichij-klas-ta-movne-pitannya/.

the basis of language"[79] – that is, a form of class struggle, an instrument through which a ruling class consolidates its symbolic and institutional authority, and whose costs fall on those least equipped to contest them.

The selectivity of recognition makes the point sharply. Ukraine recognizes and protects the cultural and linguistic rights of other minorities – Crimean Tatar is preserved as the language of an indigenous people, and extended protections for the Hungarian minority have been agreed upon as part of the EU integration negotiations. Russian, with a far larger body of speakers, is denied an equivalent scope of use. The point I am making here is not the protection of the Russian language. To demand protection would be to accept the premise on which the present policy rests – that language is a matter of security – and merely to dispute which language the state ought to defend. The result would be a deeper securitization of the question, not its resolution. The point is the lifting of prohibitions and the destigmatisation of millions of Ukrainian citizens for whom, for a variety of reasons, Russian is a first language – and therefore one of the instruments by which they comprehend who they are, orient themselves in the society, make sense of the world, and take up a position within it. Treating Russophone Ukrainians as a problem to be resolved rather than a social reality to be accommodated was not an unavoidable necessity – heterogeneity can be arranged differently. The world offers numerous examples of multilingual, multiethnic, and multi-confessional states, many of them post-conflict too, that have developed workable frameworks for representing the interests of all linguistic and ethnic groups, including the smallest minorities. Ukraine's borders enclosed precisely such a society – assembled from the fragments of two empires, shaped by centuries of overlapping administrative, linguistic, confessional, and cultural boundaries, themselves the sediment of conflicts and antagonisms, many of which have not disappeared today. This need not have been an obstacle. Belgium, Canada, Switzerland, India – all emerged from complex inheritances and found, however imperfectly, ways of managing internal difference without denying that it existed and without recourse to war. Bosnia, for example, arrived at a comparable arrangement after the war and with an intent to prevent it in future – which is instructive in its own way. The model that Ukrainian state-builders reached for, however, was that of the small, primarily ethnically homogeneous nation-states of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics – states that had, on the one hand, succeeded in moving away from Russia and entering the European Union, and whose demographic and social composition, on the other hand, differed fundamentally from Ukraine's own. The result Ukraine has ended up with was a nation-building project that treated heterogeneity not as a resource to be mobilized for growth but as a threat to be neutralized. It is this choice that this essay identifies as the critical turning point.

Securitizing the Nation: Threats and Fear

After three decades of defining the nation and determining who belongs to it, Ukrainian nation-building after the Russian invasion of 2022 has culminated in the trend that has been gradually developing from the first years of independence – the securitization of the nation's ethnic and civil components. Language, culture, historical memory, political positions, and even the production of scholarly knowledge came to be interpreted as matters of existential threat, simultaneously acting as sources of danger, objects of protection, and instruments of defense. This expansion of the security concept beyond immediate physical threats is not a new phenomenon. The Copenhagen School argued as early as the late 1980s that security is produced discursively: a securitizing move designates a referent object as existentially threatened and thereby justifies the mobilization of extraordinary measures beyond the normal bounds of political contestation.[80] This reasoning does not deny the existence of real threats

79 Saburova, "Novyi symvolichnyi poriadok."

80 Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

but draws the attention to their implications for democratic processes beyond the immediate field of military conflict.

Maria Mälksoo has argued that states under existential threat seek not only to secure their survival but "to secure their being as a certain sort of being" – to preserve a particular vision of who they are as a condition of their continued existence.[81] Ukraine is no exception. Waging war against Russia, Ukrainian authorities have defined with considerable precision what kind of Ukraine is worth defending and what threatens that project. However, the consequence of turning social, political, cultural, and ideological problems into security issues is that those who question the state's account of what Ukraine as a nation and state is are no longer dissenters or opponents but enemies that need to be prosecuted. For instance, convictions under Article 436-1 rose from twenty-four in the six years from 2015 to 2021 to over three hundred between 2022 and mid-2025, the large majority for posts, reposts, and, in at least twenty-one instances, likes on social media.[82]

Securitization narrows the space of acceptable disagreement selectively: one can criticize the government's economic policy, object to rises in taxes and utility tariffs, condemn the reforms of education and healthcare, and speak publicly about the inadequacy of pensions. None of this carries any legal sanction. Moreover, the current "cardboard protests" demonstrate that criticizing democratic backsliding of the political regime from the position of the dominant ideology does not carry any legal consequences either. By contrast, there is only one acceptable way to speak about the past, about identity, the nation, culture, and language. Language policy cannot be openly debated because it is held to concern national survival; memory laws cannot be questioned because they are held to defend historical truth; restrictions on political organizations are justified as protecting democracy itself. The more issues become securitized, the fewer remain available for ordinary disagreement. This asymmetry is what securitization produces, as it begins to undermine politics itself, seeking to suppress or fix "the inherent antagonism of the political."[83] Democratic politics presupposes disagreement. It requires the existence of adversaries whose ideas may be opposed, but whose right to participate in public debate remains unquestioned. As Mouffe has argued, the distinction between an adversary and an enemy is fundamental to democratic politics.[84] Under conditions of securitization, however, this distinction becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. Once disagreement is interpreted as a security threat and the opponent is transformed into an enemy, the question is no longer whether their arguments are convincing but whether their presence is dangerous. As a result, public deliberation gives way to security management. Questions that would ordinarily belong to the realm of political debate and are collective by their nature – holidays to celebrate, rituals to follow, partnerships to pursue, political agendas to discuss – become insulated from contestation and even get criminalized.

Paradoxically, this process depoliticizes precisely those questions that most urgently require political discussion. By fixing memory, identity, and belonging in advance, it forecloses debate over what kind of society Ukrainians wish to be living in. The struggle over competing visions of the common good is replaced by the administration of officially sanctioned truths. What disappears is not conflict itself but the public space in which conflict can be expressed and negotiated. This produces a striking paradox at the heart of contemporary Ukrainian public discourse. Dominant political and academic narratives frequently emphasize unprecedented national unity: the war, it is said, has finally consolidated Ukraine into a single political nation, dissolving the divisions of the past.[85] Yet the very existence of so many prohibitions – on symbols, on language, on historical interpretations, on politi-

81 Maria Mälksoo, "'Memory Must Be Defended': Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security," *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 3 (2015): 224.
82 Kasianov, "'To Discipline and Punish.'"
83 Mälksoo, "'Memory Must Be Defended,'" 227.
84 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 6-7.
85 Olga Kutsenko, "From Divided Society to Civic Nation? The Rise of Civic Nationalism in Ukraine," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 39, no. 1 (2026): 24-43.

cal positions – points to the fact that there are views within Ukrainian society whose mere existence is deemed incompatible with national cohesion. Unity, in this account, is thus perceived through the elimination of dissent. Claimed to strengthen national identity, the process of securitization actually leads to the narrowing of the political community, in which those who challenge that narrative increasingly appear not as political opponents but as threats. The logic of securitization thus deepens the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion based on either political stands or ethnicity by labeling these people as a source of threat. What began as an attempt to define the nation evolves into an attempt to secure that definition against alternative understandings of social reality.

The securitization of public life does not remain at the level of legislation and institutional design, penetrating further into everyday interactions. Cases under Articles 436-1 were regularly initiated on the basis of anonymous reports and complaints from vigilant citizens: neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances.[86] Once threats are held to reside not only beyond the state's borders but within society itself, fellow citizens become potential sources of danger. This is manifested through criminal prosecutions for liking and reposting communist symbols on social media; fines for using the Russian language in public; the unchecked stigmatizing rhetoric of officials and activists calling for harsh sanctions against "unfit" citizens; threats from far-right groups that go unaddressed by authorities and are popularized through media; and the persistent refusal of both academic and media analysis to treat these phenomena as problems worthy of serious attention. The result, at the affective level, is a society dominated by fear.

Typically treated as a psychological phenomenon, fear has social and political implications. While individuals may experience what might be called "natural" emotional responses to immediate physical stimuli, political emotions are responses to material and social developments, produced and sustained institutionally.[87] Fear is one of the central political emotions. Hobbes gave political fear its canonical formulation: the fear of death, the inevitable consequence of the war of all against all, pushes one to surrender freedom to the sovereign in exchange for security. A major tragedy, like war, terrorist attack, genocide, provides real grounds for manipulating fear, while simultaneously legitimizing a social order that may deploy repressive means in response, perpetuating violence. In such moments, intellectuals and politicians define who and what poses a threat and resort to fear as a “source of unity” against the threat.[88] At the same time, the source of politically produced fear is typically presented as moral or even existential, which means that the struggle against it appears not as a contest over power but as a struggle for survival.

Fear of an external enemy has historically served as an instrument of popular consolidation and elite control. As Robin has shown, fear is consistently deployed to instill specific political values: "the fear of civil war is supposed to breed a respect for the rule of law, the fear of totalitarianism an appreciation for liberal democracy, the fear of fundamentalism support for toleration and pluralism."[89] Yet this consolidation against outer threat does not presuppose the absence of fear directed inward – fear of the authorities, sanctions, marginalisation and exclusion. On the contrary, fear is an instrument of inequality, as it sustains hierarchies in which some determine what is to be feared and others comply.[90] In Ukraine, fear operates manifold. Fear of death, destruction, various losses is experienced by millions of Ukrainians as a response to the dangers of the war. Fear is utilized by authorities and public figures to mobilize people to fight the war on the frontline and to consolidate society against designated

86 Kasianov, "'To Discipline and Punish'"; Komarovskyi and Volokha, “Prison for ‘Likes’ in the Social Networks?”

87 See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 2014.

88 Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1-15.

89 Robin, *Fear*, 4.

90 Robin, *Fear*, 18-20.

threats. The qualities associated with these threats, however, are not confined to Russia and Russians: they are present, in varying degrees, across a significant part of Ukrainian society itself. The result is that fear of the external enemy and fear of repression or marginalization in one's own state and society become superimposed. As Ahmed has argued, fear does not merely respond to pre-existing threats – it actively produces the distinctions between those who belong and those who do not.[91] If securitization establishes the boundaries of acceptable politics, fear becomes the mechanism through which those boundaries are continuously maintained and enforced. Unity, in this account, is achieved less through shared national aspiration than through the fear of being identified as standing outside the nation.

Thus, this form of integration is, paradoxically, a form of fragmentation, one that simultaneously erodes trust and reinforces atomization. It prevents people from making independent judgments, from realizing shared interests, and from building the forms of solidarity that collective action requires. Instead, it increases social distance and generates suspicion. In interviews conducted for my doctoral thesis, respondents consistently reported that they are able to discuss major political questions – the ones that affect the life of the entire society and whose resolution requires public deliberation – only within the smallest and most trusted circles of personal relationships, while becoming increasingly cautious in their interactions with strangers, colleagues, and institutions. Public life contracts. Mass politics becomes unattainable. Informal self-censorship expands. The result is collective withdrawal: social relations become structured less by cooperation and solidarity than by the anticipation of potential sanctions. In this sense, fear empowers the hegemony struggle of the ruling elites, in which fear operates simultaneously through coercion, for those who comply being afraid of direct legal or physical consequences, and through consent, for those who have internalized the boundaries of the permissible. Thus, what presents itself as national unity at the level of social relations is backed not least by fear.

The consequences of this affective climate are recognized in the field of knowledge production. Fear increasingly structures academic life in Ukrainian studies at every level. The choice of research topic, the formulation of research questions, the language in which findings are presented – all are shaped by the anticipation of consequences. Entire domains of social life that generate significant tension – violent mobilization, draft evasion, illegal border crossing, political imprisonment, language conflicts – remain effectively underresearched because engaging with them carries political risk. Respondents hesitate to express views that diverge from socially approved narratives or refuse to answer altogether – the rate of non-response to sensitive questions in surveys and interviews has reached levels that themselves constitute a finding about the state of public affairs.[92] Academic disagreements are transformed into campaigns of denunciation, public shaming, and demands for ideological conformity, expressed by the collective letter against "inconvenient" researchers, the blacklisting of academic publications, campaigns against lectures deemed politically inconvenient. One begins to wonder whether a colleague has come to a conference to engage in debate or to report ideological deviations. One hesitates before submitting a manuscript, uncertain whether a particular formulation violates an existing law or will provoke accusations of disloyalty. Peer-review process is evolving into a means of conveying threats. Even well-established scholars privately admit to self-censoring out of fear of marginalization or misinterpretation. The implicit assumption behind every research is that the only legitimate scholarly commitment during wartime is to serve the interests of the nation. Knowledge production is subject to police-style surveillance, the borders of which are defined by political loyalty.

A public sphere governed by fear cannot reliably generate knowledge about itself, nor can scholarship produce reliable knowledge about the society it studies. A scholarship in which fear forecloses

91 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

92 See Kit Rickard, Gerard Toal, Kristin M. Bakke, and John O'Loughlin, "How Reliable Are Polls in Wartime Ukraine?" *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 830 (15 February 2023), https://www.ponarseurasia.org/how-reliable-are-polls-in-wartime-ukraine/.

departure from the dominant approach cannot avoid stagnation, as it loses the capacity to innovate. Younger researchers will reproduce the same mode of thinking rather than propose new approaches to the problems that matter. More broadly, the more dangerous certain questions become, the less capable a society is of understanding its own condition, and the less capable it becomes of imagining alternatives to that condition, or even improvements upon it. I include my own position in this description not as a dramatic gesture. In writing this text I do not know how to establish whether I have violated a law and have already become a criminal, or whether I will still be permitted to remain a sociologist who asks questions about Ukrainian society and looks for answers to them. The fact that I cannot determine this is not a private difficulty but an illustration of the state of the legal system that the Venice Commission identified as "vague" when it issued its conclusions on the "decommunization" laws.[93]

The war, of course, provides a real and immediate source of danger. Missiles, occupation, displacement, and death are not imagined threats but lived realities – and for many of those who bear the additional burden of linguistic or ideological suspicion, these realities are experienced with particular intensity. It would be a profound misreading of this essay to suggest otherwise. Precisely because the danger is real, it becomes an exceptionally powerful legitimating principle – one under which the "redistribution of fear,"[94] rather than its reduction, becomes the primary governing logic. What is presented as a necessary response to existential threat is simultaneously a mechanism for consolidating the symbolic power of a particular vision of Ukraine over all others. The society is thus becoming progressively less capable of debating what kind of society it wishes to be and increasingly less capable of including within that debate all those who might have something controversial to contribute to it. Only a public sphere, in which heterogeneity is treated as a resource rather than a threat, could provide the foundation for the kind of unity that might actually sustain a society through war and beyond it.

Conclusion: Conditions for Change

Surveying thirty-five years of Ukrainian independence, a pattern becomes visible: as the state sank deeper into various overlapping crises, the public agenda was dominated not by responses to the root causes of crises but by decisions in the domain of identity politics, while deindustrialization, the dismantling of the welfare state, and the concentration of wealth in oligarchic hands proceeded largely outside public debate. The political community of the Ukrainian state was re-defined in national categories, and the development of the nation was treated as a self-sufficient end rather than as a means toward improving the living conditions of the population. Over time, the conception of the nation narrowed not through a movement from civic to ethnic nationalism, or the reverse, but through their coexistence and mutual reinforcement. The two together narrowed the conception of the nation far more severely than either would have alone: language, culture, ideology, civic orientation – all became subjects of restrictive institutional regulation, producing an ideal type of Ukrainian citizen from which deviation grew increasingly impermissible. The permissible variations of Ukrainian nationhood have narrowed to the point where even the most committed patriot may soon find themselves unable to meet its requirements. War then legitimised the securitization of the entire process, seeing the constitutive elements of nation-building through the lens of threat and security.

What has emerged from these processes is, in Foucauldian terms, a regime of truth: a framework that organizes power relations within a society by producing a particular vision of reality not as the outcome of social processes, historical developments, and power struggles, but as truth itself. Truth stands above critique, doubt, disagreement, defining in advance what can be meaningfully said and what falls outside the bounds of serious discussion. It does not even require consensus, it is just taken for granted. The regime of truth about what Ukraine is as a state and society operates in precisely this

93 Venice Commission. *Joint Interim Opinion*.
94 Kyselov, "How Language Is Weaponized."

way, and it does so at two levels simultaneously. Firstly, it deepens the crisis of hegemony[95] rather than resolving it: stable hegemonic power rests on the production of consent and requires concessions to subaltern groups – it must offer enough to those it governs to make their compliance appear voluntary. Resting on extensive civil society structures and a broad institutional infrastructure, this regime produces consent up to a point. But as the boundaries of the permissible narrow and concessions give way to exclusion and compulsion, it relies increasingly on coercion: threats, prohibitions, marginalization, and criminalization. Secondly, the same regime of truth governs the dominant political and academic discourse about Ukraine through the proposition with which this essay began: that Russia is the sole source of Ukraine's failures. However, if Russia explains everything, then nothing internal to Ukraine requires explanation – and what requires no explanation cannot be analyzed, and what cannot be analyzed cannot be deliberately changed. This dynamic does not merely obscure the problem – it deepens it and reproduces it continuously. It is not only that things have gone wrong in Ukraine. It is that the conditions for identifying what went wrong, for discussing it publicly, and for studying it seriously have themselves been eroded.

The war unleashed by Russia is, obviously, an enormous threat that is destroying Ukrainian society and the Ukrainian state, and only its immediate end can significantly improve Ukraine's position. But is there anything within the sphere of responsibility of Ukrainian actors that might have been organized differently? This essay has been an attempt to identify some of those areas. Yet what it describes only points to what has gone wrong. It maps the symptoms of a structural crisis; the next step would be to examine their causes in depth. A proper diagnosis would require locating the source of the crisis and formulating the means of addressing it. That demands answering not only what went wrong but *why*: why these choices were made, who benefited from them and who lost, what alternatives were foreclosed and by whom, and what social forces might yet produce different outcomes. It would, moreover, be insufficient and ultimately unfair to direct this question exclusively at Ukraine. As Ishchenko argues in this issue, Ukraine is not an anomaly but a norm, or even "the vanguard of the world in crisis":[96] a country moving at the forefront of dynamics visible, perhaps, in less acute form, across much of the globe, and showing the most extreme futures that may await other societies if the trajectory remains unchanged. The hollowing out of democratic deliberation, the replacement of the politics of redistribution by the politics of recognition,[97] the securitization of dissent, the concentration of wealth amid the erosion of public institutions – none of these is uniquely Ukrainian. In this sense, the question "what has gone wrong in Ukraine?" is a version of a larger question about what is going wrong in the world of “democratic capitalism” after "the end of history" – and the urgency of asking it is not diminished by the difficulty of doing so.

Importantly, that question cannot be answered from a position of fear. Any answer produced under such conditions will have been shaped in advance by the boundaries of the permissible – alternative accounts will be either structurally suppressed, never voiced at all, or driven toward radicalization, becoming the source of the next escalation within Ukrainian society. The de-securitization of the public sphere and of the components of nation-building is a practical precondition for any serious conversation about Ukraine's future. Concretely, it would mean returning politics to Ukraine: reopening the space of contestation over power so that practices, rather than prohibitions, determine what counts as true and what deserves support. It would mean creating conditions under which different visions of the present and the future can be articulated – so that Ukrainians themselves, rather than the prescriptions of any authority, can deliberate about where and how they wish to go. It would also mean restoring

95 Volodymyr Ishchenko, “Class or Regional Cleavage? The Russian Invasion and Ukraine’s ‘East/West’ Divide,” *European Societies* 26, no. 2 (2024): 8-16, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2275589.

96 Volodymyr Ishchenko, “The Broken Mirror of the World in Crisis,” *The Ukrainian Forum*, forthcoming 2026.

97 Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” *New Left Review*, no. I/212 (July-August 1995), 68-70, https://doi.org/10.64590/4rl.

the conditions for genuine scholarly debate beyond propaganda and fearful analysis at the edge of the permissible, never quite knowing which line will prove fatal. Neither is scholarship, and neither serves Ukraine.

I am finishing this text in Kharkiv, as the fifth year of the war draws to a close. I write these final lines on the day two Russian FPV drones fly into my neighbors' cars and kill them on the only road into our district – the road where I know every tree at the verge and every crack in the surface, the road that felt like the most mundane part of my existence and therefore, by definition, the one that could hide no danger. These days I am afraid to drive home. Looking for a safer detour, of which there is none, I think: yes, something in Ukraine has indeed gone wrong, if the safest place I have ever known feels unsafe. Are the obvious crimes committed by Russia a sufficient reason to stop speaking about Ukraine altogether or to postpone the study of Ukrainian society until the violence ends? Does this fear cancel out all the others I have described in this essay? If anything, it sharpens them. Fear of what comes from outside – bombs, missiles, drones, occupation – is compounded by fear of what may come from within: prison terms for likes, violent conscription in the streets, expulsion from the ranks of "homo sapiens" on grounds of language. Both narrow what people in Ukraine are able to do with their lives. Precisely for this reason we must retain every opportunity to study what is happening in our society, to discuss it, and to formulate alternatives. We cannot afford to "read less" about Ukraine. We must attend to it constantly, in every dimension, while doing everything possible to end the war immediately.