

Mykhailo Minakov, Georgiy Kasianov,  
Matthew Rojansky (eds.)

## **From “the Ukraine” to Ukraine**

A Contemporary History, 1991-2021



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Mykhailo Minakov, *Kyiv, Ukraine*  
Georgiy Kasianov, *Kyiv, Ukraine*  
Matthew Rojansky, *Washington, D.C.*



# Introduction: From “the Ukraine” to “Ukraine”

*Mykhailo Minakov, Georgiy Kasianov, and Matthew Rojansky*

Ukraine as an independent state emerged in 1990–1992 as political processes, both destructive and creative, unfolded across what was once the Soviet Union and gave birth to many new nations. In the eyes of at least some Western observers, the Ukrainians were an “unexpected” nation (Wilson, 2015, pp. 2ff). Territorially the largest, most industrially developed, and most populous European state among the former Soviet republics in 1991, Ukraine entered international politics humbly but with growing visibility and greater comfort in exercising its newfound sovereignty. In 2021, Ukraine is a far more developed nation—highly resilient, dynamic at home, and active internationally—and yet is still beset by constraints and challenges that would be familiar to any observer of the country’s move toward independence thirty years ago.

Ukraine emerged as an independent political entity in the context of the third wave of democratization, a period from the 1970s to the late 1980s in which nation-state projects grew and developed, including among the peoples of the Soviet Union (Åberg & Sandberg, 2017; Huntington, 1993). In many ways, this global process combined state-building with the choice of a free society, democratic politics, and a free market economy. Like many other post-Soviet nations, independent Ukraine was founded on a commitment to liberal principles, including individual rights, competitive elections, and the participation of citizens in decision-making, all of which broke from the Soviet political norm (Brunkert, Kruse, & Welzel, 2018; Jagers & Gurr, 1995).

Over the past thirty years, the Ukrainian political system has followed a more classically “Western” model of democratic development through the distribution of authority among three branches of power and between central and local governments, as well as through competitive elections. Decommunization and democratization during the 1990s established Ukraine’s political system

within the newly sovereign state. However, in the twenty-first century, the fundamentals of that system faced attempts by external actors to establish control, freedom confronted competitive authoritarianism, and constitutional democracy collided with the continuing dominance of oligarchic clans (Hale, 2014; Way, 2015). Meanwhile, civil society was constrained by the powerful state bureaucracy, freedom of speech by large-scale media manipulations, and participatory citizenship by fake democracy and imitative reforms.

Ukrainian studies in the West has developed into a recognized research field, expanding from language, literature, and history to political science, sociology, political economy, culture, religious studies, social anthropology, and so on. Research on Ukraine has attracted scholars of many different ethnic and civic origins and is of rising interest for policy experts as well as the media. Not surprisingly, the increase in scholarly interest devoted to Ukraine has occurred most notably after pivotal events in the country. Judging by data in the catalogue of the Library of Congress, academic publications on Ukraine almost doubled annually in the periods of 2005–2011 and 2014–2019. Both of these time periods followed revolutionary changes that aimed to push back against corrupt and authoritarian Ukrainian governments. Whatever the cause, Ukraine's society, culture, and politics have become familiar to scholars thanks to many books and articles, academic and popular, including, among others, *Ukraine: A History*, by Orest Subtelny ([1988] 2009); "Does Ukraine Have a History?," by Marc von Hagen (1995); *Post-Communist Ukraine*, by Bohdan Harasymiv (2002); *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*, by Andrew Wilson (2015); *Ukraina 1991–2007* (Ukraine in 1991–2007), by Georgiy Kasianov (2008); *A History of Ukraine*, by Paul Robert Magocsi (2010); and *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, by Serhiy Plokhly (2015).

The year 1991 marked not only the emergence of Ukraine as a sovereign state on the map of Europe but also the accelerated evolution of the society, culture, and psychology of some 50 million people who lived there. Ukrainians experienced rapid social, political, and cultural changes, battles over political and economic freedom, the abandonment of Soviet-era illusions about equality for the often merciless elitism of post-Soviet capitalism, the quest for

solidarity around history and national identity, and much more. All these experiences contributed to the transformation of Soviet Ukrainians into a new Eastern European society, with all its virtues and vices.

In this book, we aim to present the contemporary history of the people of Ukraine. Ukrainians deserve a contemporary history that follows their own expression not only through politics but also in private entrepreneurship, art, religion, and self-imagination. Accordingly, the chapters that follow cover thirty years of Ukraine's development in the fields of politics, economics, energy, society, media, contemporary art, religion, national identity, and democracy.

One of our major tasks was to find a meeting point for the perspectives of Ukrainian and Western scholars on this three-decade story of contemporary Ukraine. For this reason, each chapter was co-written by authors from Western and Ukrainian universities and research institutions in what was often a time-consuming and complex interaction. Additionally, each chapter was written in an attempt to blend academic depth and rigor with accessibility to a wider, not only academic, readership. We hope that readers will agree that the result was worth the effort.

Serhiy Kudelia and Georgiy Kasianov launch the book with a chapter on Ukraine's political history. They describe the establishment of the Ukrainian state with its specific political system, political culture, and major political groups. The authors analyze how the trajectory of Ukraine's path moved from affirming core state institutions to the crisis of 2014 that took it to the verge of collapse, and then to a new political self-affirmation. Their analysis deals with both the institutional and personal dimensions of this trajectory. They look at Ukraine as a distinct post-Soviet case in which political openness and competition have brought six presidents and eight parliaments to power, brought about two "revolutions," and—both because of and in spite of this—were unable to overcome corruption in the public sphere and establish a full rule of law. Chapter 1 ends with an analysis of the armed conflict in Ukraine and its consequences for the country's sovereignty, human security, and current politics.

In chapter 2, Tymofiy Mylovanov and Ilona Sologoub present a story of the reinvention and reintroduction of the private sector after its retreat during the Soviet period. Even though in the early 1990s Ukraine possessed a large-scale economy and developed industry, its private sector was minimal. Thus privatization was more than just an economic process: it changed the very logic of individual and collective behavior, the distribution of power and wealth, and the potential for and limits of development. The authors focus on the unity and contradiction of the aim of creating a powerful private sector and the reality of its delay, and how it influenced Ukraine's humble economic development and the economic powers of the government. The history of the private sector is a saga of endless, and so far mainly futile, attempts at creating an economy that would be a supportive sphere for human creativity and entrepreneurship.

Significant inequality and the reemergence of endemic poverty and remarkable wealth, a common theme across post-Soviet societies, are also part of the history of contemporary Ukraine. In chapter 3, Yuliya Yurchenko, Pavlo Kutuev, Maksym Yenin, and Hennadii Korzhov examine how Ukrainians grew rich and poor and how inequality became a structural issue for the nation. If chapter 2 was written from a neoliberal perspective, the authors of chapter 3 consider the social transition of Ukraine from the left. They show that Ukraine's contemporary development was driven by growing social differentiation and snowballing conflicts between the haves and have-nots.

The history of a country's energy sector is usually seen as part of its larger economic history. However, in the case of Ukraine, it is also part of the chronicle of the country's pursuit of greater independence. In chapter 4, Margarita Balmaceda and Andrian Prokip trace the development of Ukraine's "energy sovereignty" over the past three decades. They divide their story into three periods: an early period of dependency (1991–2009), a period of forced independence (2009–2014), and the current period of ongoing conflict (2014–present). The authors also review how Ukraine began to lose its traditional role as the bridge between East and West, a role it fulfilled through its transit of gas and oil, as well as the emergence



and decline of oligarchic power in the sector. In a way, this chapter shows how Ukraine became part of a wider geopolitical energy contest, and how that contest has influenced Ukraine's politics, society, and economy.

In chapter 5, Diana Dutsyk and Marta Dyczok provide a historical overview of the evolution of Ukrainian mass media into the fourth branch of power and the influence of the media on the country's social and political development. Tracing the path of the media sector's transformation from a Soviet propaganda tool into a democratic and oligarchic instrument, the authors demonstrate that behind the ever-changing media landscape there occurred an evolution in Ukraine's political identity. The contest for the right to shape the understanding of what it means to be Ukrainian has framed the sector's development.

In chapter 6, Oksana Barshynova and Olena Martynyuk tell a mesmerizing story of Ukrainians' self-expression and creativity in contemporary art. The tale reveals the same quest as in other *niveaus*—the quest for individual and for small- and large-group identities, for pushing the limits of freedom, for understanding the meaning of being together—but with fewer restrictions and with much greater expressivity. Their narrative divides the history of contemporary Ukraine into two stages: the period of laying ground for new art institutions, including galleries and art centers, when art and artists were somewhat invisible to wider audiences inside and outside the country, and the period when contemporary art became influential, public, and performative. The dividing line between these periods came in 2004, when the Orange Revolution gave rise to critical art engaging a wide range of audiences. The focus of this chapter is on contemporary art as a socially significant practice that gives voice to different individuals, groups, and ideas in Ukraine.

Another important area of Ukraine's development was religion, covered in chapter 7. Starting from the new tolerance period in a mainly atheist society of the early 1990s, Ukrainians went through a number of stages leading to the spread of religious belief and confessional self-identification. Tymofii Brik and José Casanova describe the experience of several generations of post-Soviet

Ukrainians in rediscovering religion and faith. This religious revival included the shaping of new religious identities, often manifested by attending church, believing in God, trusting in the church, and losing trust in science. These changes also tested Ukraine's adherence to pluralism and tolerance. Kyiv has become a city hosting "three Romes": the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, associated with the First Rome, the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine, associated with the Second Rome (Istanbul or Byzantium), and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, associated with the Third Rome.

In chapter 8, Oksana Mikheieva and Oxana Shevel attempt to describe the evolution of Ukrainians' identities using data collected over three decades. The authors demonstrate how fluid, situational, and evolving these identities were. The independence of the Ukrainian state did not translate into the immediate formation of the Ukrainian citizen. National awakening, the rewriting of official histories, the introduction of a national currency, and state-building were crowded out by socioeconomic crises and nostalgia for the USSR in the 1990s. But with time, civic unity emerged from the populace's common fate, transcending the Soviet category of "nationality" and the post-Soviet idea of ethnolinguistic division. The Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in the Donbas indeed added to the growth of declarative Ukrainian national identity. However, the authors show that such declaration "is little more than a situational compromise." The path to a political nation in Ukraine still lies ahead.

In chapter 9, co-editors Mykhailo Minakov and Matthew Rojansky reflect on and summarize the path that Ukraine's diverse society has taken in the years from 1991 to 2021. Looking at Ukraine's experience through the lens of democracy, the authors trace the practices, ideas, and values that led to the establishment of nominal democratic institutions despite the oligarch-controlled distribution of real power and resources. These driving forces reveal dichotomies embedded in the foundations of independent Ukraine: presidentialism versus parliamentarianism, centralization versus local self-governance, democracy versus clan politics, and civic unity versus ethnolinguistic and regional divides. Put together,

contradictions among these forces gave rise to two revolutionary cycles seeking greater freedom and democratization; the same contradictions ultimately undermined revolutionary aims and enabled rising authoritarianism. The chapter—and the book—concludes with a vital but open question: which path will contemporary Ukraine chose, now that its democracy is hostage to an ongoing war with Russia and still fragile socioeconomic development?

The future is undefined, for better or for worse. But as this book shows, the path taken by Ukrainians over three decades has proved their resiliency in the face of challenges at home and from abroad. By helping to make this history accessible to Ukrainians and Western observers alike, we hope to make our own contribution to Ukraine's future.

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