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Ukraine and the Evaporating Hyphen of Market-Democracy

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# Ukraine and the Evaporating Hyphen of Market-Democracy

by Monica Eppinger

This post is part of the series [Lessons for Liberalism from the “Illiberal East”](#)

[Information wars](#), [fake news](#), [kompromat](#): surprised Ukrainians have found their lexicon for foreign interference spread as loan-words across a putative [new Cold War](#). Narratives of hegemony long familiar in Ukraine have metastasized, and their protagonists—troll hordes, political technologists, the [Paul Manafort](#)s and [Victoria Nuland](#)s—have been set loose far beyond Ukrainian borders. For those who are anxious that liberalism is stumbling into traps laid by foreign intelligence, stuck trading off with fascism and socialism or otherwise [in crisis](#), Ukraine’s recent history portends an ominous global future.

Even after investigations wind down and sensational headlines have faded, these new preoccupations may signal deeper anxieties into which the Ukrainian experience can lend insight. This post briefly reviews post-Soviet Ukrainian experiments with governance, law, and legalism, reading in them a postsocialist diagnosis of liberalism and its discontents as well as hints at some ways forward.

\* \* \*

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, reformers set off for the postsocialist East with their sights trained on two targets, markets and democracy. Their argument was rarely articulated comprehensively, but putting the pieces together, it went something like this: under socialism, the centralized economy had led to stagnation and inefficiency, while the state monopoly on property ownership had underwritten authoritarian political rule. Privatization, so the story went, would attack the foundation of both economic and political tragedies of socialism. Prosperity and democracy depended on it.

Legislating regime change proved to be a slippery proposition, as legal speech acts, their sites of production, and their rationalities came into being simultaneously. Western advisers found in the rule of law a seemingly more stable signifier. It would serve markets and democracy, each necessary to the other in a mutually reinforcing virtuous circle. Geopolitical strategy converged around a goal of

enlarging the community of “market-democracies.” Economic liberalism, here, became inseparable from political liberalism, despite their disparate and occasionally contradictory histories. The link between markets and democracy became hegemonic.

\* \* \*

Under this banner, resources for reform poured in—making Ukraine the largest target of nonmilitary U.S. aid in the world—but reforms did not go as planned. Milestones presented as necessary for postsocialist success came and went, like holding multiparty elections (1994), privatizing industry (1995), passing a post-Soviet constitution (1996), decollectivizing land ownership (2001), and adopting new criminal and civil codes (2001 and 2003). Ukrainian legislative agendas trudged to the beat of foreign advisors, but prosperity and rule of law still seemed frustratingly far off. To critics, the problem with Ukraine was, apparently, that Ukrainians kept getting in the way. Potential flaws in the reform paradigm remained unexamined.

While Western advisers fretted and diplomats grew fatigued, Ukrainians moved on. Some emigrated. Others, in mass numbers, abandoned decollectivized farmland and sought new forms of collective life in the cities, wryly referring to their entry-level identities as “service drones” or “office plankton.”

At the end of 2013, urbanites took to the streets, nominally to protest a U-turn on EU integration and more fundamentally to oppose kleptocratic authoritarianism. Blooms of office plankton took over the capital’s central square, the Maidan, where governance and authority took on new forms. By mid-December, the Maidan had become a city-within-a-city, run by volunteers organizing everything from soup kitchens and sanitation to musical entertainment and mass decision-making.

Not everyone in Ukraine signed on to the Maidan project, seeing it as primitive or counterdemocratic, working against a duly elected government. Russian sources portrayed it as mob rule in violation of the rule of law. In January 2014, when troops resorted to live fire to clear the square, repugnance for lethal intervention spread and within a month the president apparently lost his nerve, fleeing to Russia in the middle of the night along with many of his camp. It seemed that the precariat had triumphed over oligarchy. Shortly thereafter, the annexation of Crimea and a shooting war in southeastern Ukraine began.

During fieldwork that summer, I witnessed an impressive spectrum of redirected Maidan activism. Untrained volunteers, many coming straight from the Maidan, beat government troops to the front. Childless investment bankers cooked hot lunches for local schools. Architects held citizen meetings to plan Maidan memorials. Lawyers met in parks to draft anticorruption legislation. The current picture, however, appears more complicated. In formal politics, a new oligarch has found power; alongside, some of the creative energy of the Maidan is finding new channels, ranging from aiding internally displaced persons to organizing neo-Nazi intimidation. These realms of activity do not fit neatly into liberalism's categories of state and civil society or public and private spheres. The notion of sovereignty seems both of existential import and oddly beside the point.

\* \* \*

The Ukrainian experience, I suggest, offers a postsocialist diagnosis of liberalism's ailments. It amounts to more than distaste for the poetics of authoritarianism, a style that has come to stand for illiberalism—Vladimir Putin's shows of machismo or Donald Trump's theatrics of nativism—or resistance to hypocrisy. Yes, it encompasses the weaponized ethnocentrism of pan-Slavicism, white supremacist thuggery, and endless wars on terror. But more fundamentally, in a kind of hidden work of pragmatics, it pushes against a central assumption that post-Cold War liberalism made about itself, namely, the felicitous relationship between markets and democracy. Ukrainian "failures" of the 1990s expose that assumption and its possible fallacy. Private property can, it turns out, promote oligarchy as well as democracy (see Eppinger 2015); market economics may breed aspirations that take illiberal, or even more unconventional, forms; citizen action can institutionalize or fracture critique. The Ukrainian experience with law and governance introduces questions about the hyphen in market-democracy: is it necessary? Disappearing? A mirage all along?

Ukrainian postsocialism reminds us to be attuned to the hegemony wielded, at times, not through state power but through the logics of governance. In the space left by market-democracy's evaporating hyphen, new forms of engagement are arising, unmotivated by market forces or state-based rationalities. They alert us to a time of innovation, perhaps even beyond Ukraine, among those finding political and economic liberalism decoupled.

## Reference

Eppinger, Monica. 2015. "Property and Political Community: Democracy, Oligarchy, and the Case of Ukraine." *George Washington International Law Review* 47, no. 4: 825–91.

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