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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Melnykovska, I. (2023). Studying Ukraine in Political Science: From Theory Testing to Theory Building. *Ukrainian Analytical Digest*, 2, 8-9. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000637349>

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Studying Ukraine in Political Science: From Theory Testing to Theory Building

By Inna Melnykovska (Central European University, Vienna)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000637349

Studying Ukraine in Political Science has been challenging due to the necessity of justifying Ukraine's case as being the 'best fit' in testing established theoretical paradigms and its potential—either as a single case or in comparison with other cases—to enrich the general theoretical knowledge. The main concern of social scientists who were eager to study Ukraine was to withstand the criticism that is usually expressed toward area studies of producing “too specific” and “less generalizable” (read: less valuable) knowledge, as well as being descriptive and non-methodological.

Their main challengers were so called ‘Westsplainers’ who treated the knowledge of regional, domestic and local context as redundant in understanding the workings of political systems, economies and societies, including Ukraine's. In reaction, Ukraine experts learned to combine their in-depth knowledge of the country with methodological excellence in their research practice. Country expertise was thereby represented as a guarantor of the rigorous research quality in producing more nuanced testing of political, economic and social (ir)regularities. In contrast to traditional Ukrainian Studies, which usually highlighted the specifics of Ukraine's language, culture and history, Ukraine experts in political science sought to highlight the country's ‘typicalness’ and its comparability with other countries across the world.

Being attacked by Russia, Ukraine now has a chance to switch from being a case for theory testing to a case for theory building. In pre-war times, studying Ukraine was mainly embedded into the theoretical paradigms of transformation and democratization studies. Occasionally it was addressed by the approaches dealing with modern (competitive) autocracies. The research questions concentrated on the transformative powers of external actors (e.g., the European Union, NATO) and their effectiveness in democratization processes in Ukraine, while local forces were ascribed no causal power and rendered as ‘contextual conditions’.

The value added of Ukraine's case for both theoretical paradigms was controversial. The transformative powers of Western democracy promoters were limited, and the country landed in the gray zone of hybrid regimes between democracy and autocracy. Nevertheless, the explanatory powers of autocratic approaches fell short as well, as the attempts at power consolidation in Ukraine failed and its political regime was assigned

to the group of ‘defective democracies’, where political pluralism was assured through competition of rival elite groups and not by functional democratic institutions. According to these theoretical paradigms, Ukraine's political and state institutions would have been too weak to counter Russia's aggression. They both were wrong.

Collaborative and (self-)coordinated efforts of society, business and state actors at national and local levels have resulted in Ukraine's resistance. Explaining this puzzle has the potential to generate a new theory of democratic and collaborative resilience, which would be relevant for both democratizing regimes and advanced democracies. Furthermore, refugee flows and building of new communities in Ukraine and abroad, as well as modern interstate war with its hybrid warfare tools, among other topics promise to bring new impulses to contemporary theoretical and conceptual discussions and provide the ground for interdisciplinary academic collaborations.

Eventually, and living up to the comparative nature of political science, Ukraine will be in search of a new family of cases to be compared with. Ukrainian refugee academics currently hosted by Western universities could extend their academic networks and initiate new research collaborations with traditional ‘Ukrainists’, as well as with researchers from different (sub)disciplines and with varying regional expertise. In this way they could pioneer a true ‘decolonization’ of studying Ukraine in political science from the previous theoretical paradigms and the restraint of the universal knowledge.

Russia's war brought methodological challenges, but did not eliminate the ways we can study Ukraine. Doing field work in Ukraine is not secure. Furthermore, the war context has made some topics (e.g., corruption) politically sensitive and introduced new ethical considerations. Digital ethnography, remote observations and online interviewing, among other qualitative and quantitative methods that are booming in political science since the Covid-19 pandemic offer novel ways to collect necessary data in the war-torn research field. Initiatives to create depositories of Ukraine-related data (e.g., Discuss Data, <https://discuss-data.net/>) will not only consolidate the efforts of data collection and generation, but will also enable and sustain the interest in Ukraine and its study in academic communities across the world. Ukraine-related data depositories could serve as incubators of methodologically rigorous research on Ukraine.

All in all, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine opens many opportunities for social scientists with Ukraine expertise to meaningfully integrate into the discipline's search for new theoretical paradigms, jump on the bandwagon of contemporary methodological trends,

overcome divisions with traditional Ukrainian studies and generate new collaborative interdisciplinary and cross-/trans-regional research. Those who study Ukraine should grasp these opportunities in order to move from the periphery toward the core of political science.

About the Author

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Scholars' Attention to Ukraine: the Same Problems as in the Mass Media

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000637349

Introduction

There are two main problems with scholarly research on Ukraine, and they are roughly the same as the problems with the attention to our country from the mainstream world media.

The first of these is common to most other non-leading countries: most publications remember them only when something extraordinary happens there. For example, the largest war in Europe since World War II.

The second problem is more specific: Russian strategic narratives, or, in other words, Russian propaganda, can infiltrate scientific articles. After all, scientific journals are also media. They disseminate information about the real world, and therefore they can also set an agenda or present one's own interpretation of events.

The First Problem

Taking as an example my own field, communication studies, the first problem is very pronounced. Research in this area has largely revolved around the phenomenon of Ukrainian activism. In other words, foreign researchers have paid little attention to the peculiarities of the Ukrainian media system, the mediatization of Ukrainian society, censorship and self-censorship, and other similar topics. Although there have been several important works by Ukrainian researchers published in international journals (for example, Orlova, 2016, Fedirko, 2020 and others), there exist far more extensive bodies of work on the following topic areas:

The Revolution of Dignity, and the role of media and social media in the self-organization of citizens. There are studies in this area based on the principles of political science, communication science, sociology, linguistics, and other disciplines. The surge of these studies occurred at a time when the world was still pinning its hopes on social media services, considering them

to be a driver of democracy. Accordingly, the focus of scholars at that time was on how horizontal self-organization helped to overcome dictatorships. However, this surge of attention was not too high, as it was overshadowed by the study of the Arab Spring, which occurred chronologically earlier.

The study of Ukrainian resistance to Russian armed and information aggression since 2014. To a large extent, attention was also focused on activism. This included volunteers who used social media to provide soldiers with medicine and military equipment as well as civil society organizations that have learned to effectively counter Russian propaganda, substituting themselves for the state structures that are supposed to take care of this. However, there has also been intensive study of the Russian propaganda itself, its features and effectiveness. Ukraine acted as a "testing ground" for observation, and it was on the basis of Ukrainian material that it became possible to find out how to effectively resist this propaganda.

The third, somewhat less popular area of research was feminist activism: some communication researchers drew attention to the fact that the #янебоюсьсказати (#IAmNotAfraidToSayIt) flash mob in Ukrainian social media took place a year earlier than the similar global movement under the slogan #metoo.

The Second Problem

As for the second problem, the presence of a Russian imperial perspective on events in Ukraine in academic articles, two factors contribute to this.

Firstly, the activity of Russian scholars with an imperial outlook, both those who still work in Russia and those who have settled in Western universities. Without a doubt, this is not about origin or ethnicity; I personally know many people from Russia who have a very democratic