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Dissecting the Political Landscape of War-Torn Ukraine: Between Internal Challenges and External Threats

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Abstract: *This paper explores the political landscape of war-torn Ukraine, focusing on the country's core domestic problems. The war in Ukraine has led to a significant deterioration of Ukraine's political landscape. While victory on the battlefield is Ukraine's utmost priority, escalating internal problems pose additional challenges. With Ukraine having obtained EU candidate status, these problems have moved to a new level on the EU's membership agenda. The most urgent of these is endemic corruption, which has gained fresh momentum during the war and has put foreign aid at risk. As the costs of the war grow, international pressure on the Ukrainian authorities to show better results increases. Accountability and transparency should become the guiding principles of the reconstruction and recovery processes to maintain Western support and ensure effective postwar reconstruction.*

Keywords: *Ukraine; EU; Corruption; De-oligarchization; Minority Rights; Reconstruction*

INTRODUCTION

The Russian-Ukrainian war has triggered the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Besides dramatic casualties and substantial economic losses, the war has also compounded a number of preexisting problems in the country. Endemic corruption, the influence of oligarchs over domestic institutions, as well as frequent discrimination of journalists, activists, and minorities are still in place, with some of them taking a new shape amid the war. All these problems pose a serious threat to effective post-war reconstruction and European integration.

Given the initial estimates of the costs of post-war reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine, this could become the most extensive reconstruction effort in modern history. Leading roles in this process are assigned to the United States (US) and the European Union (EU), with the latter facing serious consequences from the war.

The EU candidate status provided to Ukraine shortly after the outbreak of war made problems facing the country not only an issue of internal politics but also part of the EU membership agenda. Joining the EU could provide Ukraine with a solid institutional framework. On the other hand, in wartime, it will be increasingly challenging to adopt policies that fully meet EU standards for accession.

Additionally, as the costs of the war grow, international donors have become more suspicious of the movement of funds allocated to Ukraine. Addressing the endemic corruption problem has become an urgent topic for Ukrainian authorities as it is essential to maintaining international support.

While there is extensive literature on the Russia – Ukraine war and its repercussions (Abay et al. 2023; Izzeldin 2023; Liadze et al. 2023; Zhou et al. 2023; Tong 2024), there has been less emphasis on the political landscape of war-torn Ukraine.

This research addresses the following questions:

1. What are the major problems surrounding post-Maidan Ukraine's domestic politics, and how has the war influenced them?
2. What are the main features of Ukraine's reconstruction process?

This paper is an in-depth case analysis that uses policy analysis to examine Ukraine's response to internal challenges and external threats.

ON THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF UKRAINE

When assuming presidential powers, President Zelensky's two main promises were to end the war and uproot corruption. According to a poll (2023) conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, those are the two goals the Ukrainians want to accomplish more than anything else (USAID 2023).

When war broke out in Ukraine, the country was characterized as an electoral democracy. The country met the minimal criteria for democracy – it held regular competitive elections with universal suffrage – but failed to meet some of the requirements associated with liberal democracy, such as the consistent rule of law (Szostek and Toremark 2023). For years, the country's political landscape had been marred by the strong influence of oligarchy over politics, endemic corruption, frequent attacks against journalists and civil society activists, as well as increasing tensions between religious minorities.

Before 2022, political parties operated freely in Ukraine, except for the Communist Party. However, in May 2022, President Zelensky signed a law banning those political parties that justify, recognize as legitimate, or deny Russian aggression against Ukraine (Freedom House 2023). Eleven political parties have been suspended because of their alleged links with Russia, including the country's largest opposition party, "the Opposition Platform - For Life" party (The Guardian 2022c).

Before that, all of the country's communist parties were banned under the "decommunization" law, which received harsh criticism from the Venice Commission (Venice Commission 2015). It was described as a "dangerous precedent" endangering Ukraine's freedom of expression and association (Amnesty International 2015). Likewise, the law of 2022 was criticized by civil society groups who expressed their concern about a lack of safeguards to prevent bans from being imposed on parties arbitrarily (Freedom House 2023).

Another problem related to political parties has been their funding. Over the decades, the lack of a legal framework made political parties financially dependent on individual donors. Informal (corruption) networks between oligarchs and the political elite, with the former securing economic benefits and, in return, providing political support, formed the basis of their influence (Halling and Stewart 2016, 5).

An attempt to partly address this issue was made in 2015 when the Ukrainian Parliament enacted a law requiring all political parties to submit financial reports to the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) on their income and expenditures. Most importantly, the law

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provided for the transparency of money in politics and significantly reduced the opportunities for oligarchs to influence Ukrainian politics. However, the legal adjustments made by the Parliament, first in response to the pandemic and then to the war, reduced the transparency of money flows in Ukrainian politics by pausing the requirement for parties to submit financial reports to the NACP. In response to this, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in Ukraine called on Parliament to immediately restore political party financial reporting, arguing that it was an essential element on the path towards European integration and in implementing the country's obligations under the UN Convention against Corruption (IFES report 2023).

A positive reform was adopted in 2021, which banned politically connected business magnates, referred to as oligarchs, from funding political parties (Freedom House 2022). Still, the major criticism of the law has been that it might display subjective targeting. Thus, the issue of party financing in Ukraine remains opaque, regardless of the recent laws that regulate it.

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are two fundamental freedoms particularly vulnerable in conflict. The media can cause national security concerns: they are described as potential tools and targets of attack that can be "weaponized" and as a space where "information warfare" is waged. Governments may try to block the media they consider present a security threat. However, such action should have firm grounds, given the tension between media restrictions and democratic principles of free speech and expression (Szostek and Orlova 2024, 82).

Before the war, the Ukrainian media landscape was characterized by pluralistic features, open criticism of the government, and investigation of powerful figures. Regardless, oligarchs owned and influenced many outlets, making these serve their interests. Access to most Russian news channels, websites, and social media platforms has been banned (Freedom House 2022; Freedom House 2023).

Media concentration is observed mainly in the television segment, which blocks people's access to pluralistic media (European Commission 2023, 7). At the start of the war, the Ukrainian government consolidated all television channels under the unified United News platform (United News Marathon), which offered 24/7 coverage of the war. While the authorities justified this from a national security perspective, journalists and international press freedom groups raised alarms about its impact on media freedom (The New York Times 2022). Concerns about government influence were also raised after several channels run by political opponents of President Zelensky were barred from joining Telemarathon (Reporters without Borders, 2023). As the war enters its third year, critics increasingly question the usefulness and the budget allocated for broadcasting - the state budget for 2024 is more than $45 million (Voice of America 2024).

In addition, in late December 2022, Zelensky signed into law a controversial bill that expanded the government's control over the media to prevent the potential spread of Russian misinformation. Under the new law, the regulatory body, the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council, whose members are appointed by the president's administration and by members of Parliament, have broader authority over Ukrainian media organizations and journalists. The authorities can close news sites without a court order, without officially registering them as media (Freedom House 2023).

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The lawmakers say this would help to meet the EU standards for membership. Still, journalists and international press freedom groups blame the government for using the membership obligations as a pretext to enhance state control over the press. The European Federation of Journalists called on the government to revise the law, noting that it contradicts the European standards of press freedom because it endangers the independence of the state media regulator, whose members are appointed by the president and the Parliament (International Federation of Journalists 2023).

Additionally, according to the provision that entered into force in January 2022, print media outlets registered in Ukraine must publish in Ukrainian. Publications in other languages must be accompanied by a Ukrainian version. Although this is part of state policy to strengthen national identity, there are not enough guarantees for certain minorities' linguistic rights (HRW 2022).

The new law governing the work of the media significantly tightens state control over it and deprives the national regulator of its independence. Given that media reform is one of the EU's conditions for negotiations on membership, the authorities might need to revise the law by bringing it closer to international standards. While the Russian aggression justifies the measures that the Ukrainian government takes to withstand it, it was not uncommon for the Ukrainian authorities (especially during Petro Poroshenko's presidency) to restrict freedom of expression while invoking as justification the need to counter the Russian military aggression (Reliefweb 2018). Thus, achieving a reasonable balance between freedom of speech and national security is necessary.

CORRUPTION AND DE-OLIGARCHIZATION IN UKRAINE

Since independence, corrupt practices in Ukraine have shaped the rules by which the country has been governed. The country's powerful oligarchs controlled parliamentary blocs, ran television stations, and exerted significant political influence. After the Maidan revolution of 2014, some positive changes, such as police reform and public procurement, but illegal practices continued (De Waal 2016).

Today, it is argued that Ukraine is fighting a two-front war: at an external level - against Russia - and at an internal level - against corruption (Martin 2023). After the war, corruption is believed to be the second major problem in Ukraine. The results of a survey (2023) conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) with the support of USAID showed that 94% of people in Ukraine see corruption as widespread throughout the country, and more people think it has increased rather than decreased since February 2022 (KIIS 2023). The most severe type of corruption is political corruption, which President Zelensky promised to battle when he took up his post.

After receiving EU candidate status, some positive reforms have been made to fight corruption. In summer 2022, parliamentarians adopted the new National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2021–2025, and in March 2023, the government adopted a State Anti-corruption Program as an action plan for that strategy (Kalitenko 2023, 4). According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index of 2023, Ukraine increased its anti-corruption score from 33 to 36 out of 100. The country's growth by 3 points is estimated as one of the best results in the world over the past year (Transparency International 2023).

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Still, as the war continues, the level of corruption is persistent, and it is gaining a new shape. Not surprisingly, fighting over corruption becomes less of a priority for a country under attack. This, in turn, creates a number of additional corruption risks in post-war states, of which Ukraine might face the following: 1) capacity challenges resulting from the loss of anti-corruption infrastructure and trained staff; 2) lack of political will or, otherwise, the acknowledgment by the post-war government of the urgency of fighting corruption, in addition to all the other reconstruction efforts; 3) legacy of pre-war and wartime corruption; and 4) weak rule of law (Kos 2022, 154-155).

One of the significant drivers of persistent corruption in Ukraine is the dominance of oligarchs in political and economic life. This is an obstacle to Ukraine's socio-economic development and its EU aspirations.

In 2021, Ukraine passed a law on oligarchs as part of President Zelensky's broader "de-oligarchization" program. The new law defines an "oligarch" as anyone meeting at least three criteria: political influence, media holdings, economic monopolies, and minimum total assets of around $100 million. The president of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council will decide who qualifies as an oligarch and place the names on a national register (The Washington Post 2022). The major criticism of the law is its potential to be misused to target political opponents or their supporters (RFE/RL 2023). Furthermore, it is argued that the law does not consider the division of powers, with the Security Council now endowed with unprecedented power (Minakov 2023, 150). The Venice Commission also concluded that the law has a "personal approach", a "potential of being misused for political purposes", and it "cannot be seen as a democratic response to the scourge of oligarchization" (Venice Commission 2023, 16).

The war has naturally weakened the role of oligarchs due to the ceasing of political rivalry and the economic impact of the war on the oligarchs. Still, experts argue that only after the war will it be possible to determine whether or not their influence diminished (The Guardian 2022b). Amid the war, the priority for oligarchs was not politics but the maintenance of their assets and wealth.

Thus, despite some positive reforms, there is room for further improvements. Corruption is gaining a new shape in wartime, and it might put foreign aid at risk. While the war is ongoing, it will be challenging for Ukrainian authorities to run an effective anti-corruption policy. However, discontinuing this policy might cause additional dangers in the post-war period.

THE STATE OF MINORITIES

Another condition for Ukraine to start negotiations on EU accession is related to the law on national minorities. In this regard, a positive step was the adoption of the amendments to the law of national minorities in August 2023, considering the expert assessment of the Council of Europe. The changes refer particularly to the use of national minority languages, except for the language of an "aggressor country", specifically the Russian language (The Kyiv Independent 2023).

The rights of religious minorities are generally respected in Ukraine, but smaller religious groups continue to report cases of discrimination. This mainly refers to the members of the Ukrainian branch of the Russian Orthodox Church (UOC), one of the country's two major Orthodox churches. Since the start of the war, the Security Service of Ukraine has searched

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hundreds of UOC churches and opened criminal proceedings against dozens of UOC clergy for collaborating with the Russian authorities and spreading pro-Russian propaganda (USCIRF 2023, 73). The UOC is historically tied to Moscow, but in May 2022, it declared its complete independence from Moscow, and since the start of the war, it has repeatedly expressed its loyalty to Ukraine (National Catholic Reporter 2023).

In addition, in October 2023, the Ukrainian Parliament gave preliminary approval to a law that would ban the minority UOC for its alleged collaboration with the Russian military (Reuters 2023a). Shortly afterward, President Zelensky ordered his Cabinet of Ministers to submit a bill to Parliament that would ban the activities of "religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation to operate in Ukraine" (USCIRF 2023, 73). The law in progress has been harshly criticized for non-compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights and Ukraine's constitution. UN officials stressed that "all people in Ukraine have full freedom to manifest and practice their religion or belief", and "lawmakers must clearly define the legitimate aim of the proposed restrictions and ensure their necessity and proportionality" (UN Press 2023).

Thus, the situation with minority rights, particularly the religious minorities, remains complicated. If passed into law, the authorities should provide clear justification for the new bill allowing a ban on the activities of the UOC. Otherwise, it might seriously affect the country's entry into the European Union.

ON UKRAINE'S RECONSTRUCTION

Unlike reconstruction after a disaster, reconstruction in conflict zones often occurs during the conflict. Governments launch the reconstruction and rebuilding process as soon as affected areas are recaptured and secured (US Government Accountability Office 2023).

Rebuilding Ukraine may cost more financially than the war itself. The country has already suffered levels of damage not seen in Europe since World War II (Michael Jenkins 2023). Thus, it is assumed that the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine may be the largest and longest reconstruction process in modern history. As of spring 2023, the World Bank estimated that the cost of Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery would be US $411 billion (The World Bank 2023).

Ukraine's reconstruction efforts are supported worldwide, with a significant share coming from the EU and the US. Rebuilding Ukraine is believed to be a partnership between the US and Europe, with the US leading the security matters and the EU leading the economic recovery, especially in the light of the accession talks. At the same time, the US should stay deeply involved in the economic domain and Europe in the security domain (Ries and Shatz 2023).

The war in Ukraine harmed Europe in many ways. It has significantly reduced the economic growth of Europe and aggravated inflation across the continent. Nevertheless, as the European officials put it, "the EU's solidarity with Ukraine is unshakeable, even as European citizens shoulder the lion's share of the economic and humanitarian costs of this war" (Delegation of the EU to the US 2024).

So far, the EU and its Member States have made over $96 billion available for Ukraine in financial, military, humanitarian, and refugee assistance, with this number growing constantly (Ibid). In January 2023, the EU established a multi-agency donor coordination platform and, six months later, the Ukraine Facility, an instrument designed to provide predictable financial support for Ukraine over the 2024-2027 period (European Commission 2023b). Additionally, the

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EU is interested in Ukraine's future integration into the EU's defense system: "As we look to the future, we must think of Ukraine's defense capabilities as part of our own defense capabilities. We must think of Ukraine's defense industry as part of our own defense industry" (European Commission 2024).

In light of Ukraine's reconstruction, some politicians and analysts have called for a "Marshall Plan" for Ukraine, modeled on the US program to rebuild much of Western Europe following the Second World War. Besides the financial aspect, proponents of a Marshall-type plan argue that it would also benefit Ukraine's democratic development and ambitions to join the European Union (RFE/RL 2022).

Ukraine has been seeking EU membership since the "Orange Revolution" of 2004 and more enthusiastically since the 2013-14 Maidan protests; however, before the war, EU membership was off the table for a country plagued by corruption (The Guardian 2022a). However, the aggression against Ukraine has changed the 'EU's calculus about the costs and benefits of admitting new states to the union' (Besch and Ciaramella 2023). The EU candidate status granted to Ukraine four months after President Zelensky described the war as "a victory of Ukraine (…) a victory that motivates, inspires and strengthens" (Reuters 2023b).

The prospect of EU membership is directly linked to Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. Access to the world's largest single market, the EU's financial resources, and development assistance might significantly ease this process. No less important, the membership would bring Ukraine close to a broader community of democratic nations committed to human rights, the rule of law, and good governance (Perrota Berlin 2023, 7).

On the other hand, membership requires that any prospective member state meet specific political and economic benchmarks before joining the Union. This will be a long and challenging process for the Ukrainian authorities, who now prioritize victory on the battlefield.

At present, Ukraine could be described as an aspiring democracy that is at war. It does not currently meet the criteria for electoral democracy or liberal democracy, as these terms are used in political science. It has a level of media control incompatible with democracy in peaceful conditions (Chatham House 2023). There is also the longstanding problem of corruption, one of the major concerns about the billion-dollar funds connected to reconstruction. Not surprisingly, four of the seven initial recommendations for candidacy status are linked to anti-corruption reforms (Perrota Berlin 2023, 7).

International aid has a track record of breeding inefficiency and corruption in countries with fragile institutions (GIS Report 2023). In post-war states, actors inside or outside the country always seek to take advantage of the emergency. This causes a rise in the level of corruption, which, in turn, puts foreign aid at risk. Therefore, as the country urgently needs foreign aid, the authorities must prove that the funds serve their purpose.

Amid the war, two high-ranking Ukrainian officials have been suspected of embezzling funds involved in the procurement of humanitarian aid (Martin 2023). Although President Zelensky announced the dismissal of all officials in charge of corruption (CNN 2023), this incident significantly undermined the confidence of foreign donors (Politico 2023). Immediately after this, the White House introduced a list of reforms that Ukraine should implement to continue receiving US financial assistance and move towards EU integration.

The reforms focus on the functioning of the Supervisory Boards of state-owned businesses, anti-corruption bodies, the High Council of Justice, and the judiciary in general

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(Ukrainska Pravda 2023). These are also requirements for EU membership and benchmarks for the IMF. As the US special representative for Ukraine's economic recovery puts it, "Ukraine and its Western supporters must ensure that recovery takes place in line with international best practices, including reforms that bake transparency and accountability into the effort. So reform and recovery go hand in hand" (Financial Times 2023).

Thus, regardless of the moral justification for international support to war-torn societies, international aid might create new opportunities for corrupt behavior. In this context, an accountability-based approach from the party receiving foreign aid becomes a must. The principles of transparency and accountability should guide the recovery process of Ukraine; otherwise, it risks undermining foreign assistance.

CONCLUSION

On top of the immediate challenges caused by the war, Ukraine needs to tackle several other problems compounded by the war. Wartime measures on security and defense are not always in compliance with international standards.

The war has accelerated anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine, but significant drivers of corruption remain. The new anti-corruption and de-oligarchization laws often contradict the principle of political pluralism and can be misused for political purposes. The cessation of political rivalry and the economic consequences of the war have curbed the power of oligarchs, but only after the war's end will it be possible to identify whether or not their influence has diminished.

The situation for journalists remains precarious. The new laws significantly expand state control over the media, endangering international freedom of the press and expression, and moving Ukraine a step away from EU standards.

The war has also toughened the situation for smaller religious minorities, particularly the followers of the Ukrainian branch of the Russian Orthodox Church. If passed into law, the lawmakers must clearly define the legitimate aim of the proposed restrictions on religious minorities; otherwise, these might seriously affect the country's entry into the EU.

All these problems pose a serious threat to effective post-war reconstruction and European integration. Naturally, Ukraine now prioritizes victory on the battlefield, but sidelining all other problems might bring further challenges in the post-war period. Additionally, discontinuing anti-corruption and de-oligarchization policies might undermine international support. As reconstruction costs grow, international donors increasingly express concerns about financing Ukraine without solid oversight. Thus, Ukraine's reconstruction process must be rooted in ensuring transparency and accountability; otherwise, it might put foreign aid at risk.

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