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Paradise Lost. Ukraine in 1991-2012

A Review of: G. Brogi, M. Dyczok, O. Pachlovska, G. Siedina (eds.),
Ukraine Twenty Years After Independence, Aracne, Roma 2015

Usually, I do not review collective monographs. In the poly- and heteroglossia of different authors, one can rarely review all the theses and arguments in an adequate and fair way. But the appearance of *Ukraine Twenty Years After Independence* is a different, and unique case. The Foreword informs that the papers edited by G. Brogi, M. Dyczok, O. Pachlovska and G. Siedina, published by Aracne in Rome (2015)¹, are the result of a conference held at the Third University of Rome. The interest of this collection, however, goes beyond a short-lived overview of current topicalities. The result of the conference is not only a collection of papers on Ukraine's contemporary history (1991-2012) written by scholars, politicians and experts representing different disciplines and professional areas: it is an intellectual portrait of a country on the eve of a tragic U-turn. Brought together by the Italian Association of Ukrainian Studies in June 2012, twenty-four authors drew a contradictory, multidimensional and realistic portrait of a country that does not exist any more in the form it existed before 2013.

This book summarizes twenty years of peaceful development of a post-Soviet country in the heart of Europe, its advancement in culture, society and politics. The papers are organized around seven questions. In the editor's foreword Giovanna Brogi (p. 11-12) lists those questions in the following order:

¹ In alphabetical order the papers are the following: A. Achilli, *Soviet Dissident Writers in the Literary Canon of Contemporary Ukraine*, pp. 289-302; S.A. Bellezza, *Building Memory. National Identities and Monuments in Post-Soviet Ukraine*, pp. 241-264; G. Brogi, *Foreword*, pp. 11-15; F.I. Dacko, O. Turiy, *Traditional Churches in Independent Ukraine*, pp. 65-84; C. Filippini, *The Constitutional Development of Ukraine*, pp. 119-140; M. Gonchar, *Energy Pendulum as an Illustration of Ukraine's Twenty-Year Way*, pp. 85-100; P. Grilli di Cortona, B. Pisciotta, *The Ukrainian Political System from Independence to Democratic Involution*, pp. 101-118; V. Horbach, *Nobody Wanted To Win*, pp. 165-172; M. Marynovych, *Religious Freedom vs Traditions of State-Favoritism*, pp. 57-64; M.A. Moser, *Pushing the 'Regional Language'*, pp. 189-212; A.J. Motyl, *Ukraine After the Yanukovych Ruin*, pp. 173-188; O. Paliy, *The Consequences of the 2012 Elections in Ukraine*, pp. 157-164; M. Pavlyshyn, *Postcoloniality as Method and Mind-Set. Ukrainian Literature and Literary Scholarship 1991-2011*, pp. 275-288; Y. Scherbak, *Geopolitical Role of Ukraine and Its Foreign Politics During 20 Years of Independence*, pp. 19-26; N. Trach, *Language and Identity in Contemporary Ukraine*, pp. 213-226; K. Wolczuk, R. Wolczuk, *'Soft is Beautiful...!' Ukraine's Approach to Regional Integration*, pp. 27-38.

Did the past two decades of Ukrainian life bring advancement in the socio-political and cultural situation of the country, or are negative outcomes dominant? Are there indications in post-Soviet society that some real change occurred in mentality, intellectual skills, sense of civic responsibility? Is there any chance of regeneration of civil society definitively wrecked by the corruption spread in most branches of social, political and economic life? Does Ukraine have a real possibility of continuing her eternal policy of lavishing between one pole and the other in search of a 'third way'? What are the chances of the opposition to find some kind of cohesive discourse and a pragmatic way to bring the country out of the stormy waters between the 'Russian Scylla' and the 'nativist Charybdis'? How may the general economic and civilizational improvements of the last two decades overcome the system inherited by Soviet time, based on blackmail, domination of stiff hierarchical bureaucracy in key-institutions of intellectual and cultural life? How may civil society overcome the open attacks launched by the Yanukovych era onto the most vital organs of education, media, political life?

To cope with the poly- and heteroglossia that are inherent in any collective publication, I will review most of the papers according to the responses they provide to these questions.

1. *Ukraine's Overall Advancement*

The first overarching question is whether there was any "advancement in the socio-political and cultural situation". I found six more or less direct answers to this question in the publication. The authors of three papers come up with the conclusion that after the collapse of Soviet Union Ukraine's development was highly contradictory, moving back and forth within a cycle.

Yuri Scherbak rightly points out that slow and contradictory 'capitalist transformation' has reversed into decline since the presidency of Victor Yanukovych (p. 20). Based on the assessment of how the application of human rights developed in Ukraine, Yevhen Zakharov also states that until 2010 the country's evolution was oscillating between authoritarian and democratic poles. Zakharov claims that "[v]iolations of political and civil rights in 2010–2012 were the most serious of all the years since independence" (p. 55). Pietro Grilli di Cortona and Barbara Pisciotta propose an in-depth inquiry into the evolution of the Ukrainian political system. Their conclusion resembles those of Scherbak and Zakharov: "[t]wenty years after its independence, Ukraine is still not a consolidated democratic regime" (p. 114). In a way, all these experts and scholars agree that Ukraine started from great promise of freedoms but ended up with democratic decline in 2012.

If in the previous papers authors were sticking to a descriptive approach, Roman and Kataryna Wolczuk and Alexander J. Motyl add some prognoses to their descriptions. Roman and Kataryna Wolczuk analyze two decades of Ukraine's regional integration. They finish their brilliant analysis of Ukraine's oscillation between the European and Eurasian integration projects with the optimistic conclusion that Ukraine (in 2012) is on the verge of advancement: they saw the readiness of the elites to make the 'non-soft' choice (p. 35). Subsequent behavior of Yanukovych and post-Maidan leaders proved their conclusion to be right.

Alexander Motyl contributed with a paper dedicated to the assessment of the possible scenarios of Ukraine's development 'after the Yanukovich ruin'. This paper contains several predictions that came true (well, some didn't) in the course of Ukrainian history in 2013-2015. But I fully agree with Motyl's major thesis: Yanukovich ruined the institutional set-up of post-Soviet Ukraine; after Yanukovich dismissal, the political regime and state will need to be created 'de novo' (p. 180). A. Motyl continues:

With institutional destruction, regime collapse, and Regionnaire flight on the one hand, and oligarchic influence, coercive uncertainty, social mobilization, and charismatic leaders on the other, Ukraine could be in the position to break with more than 24 years of regime ineffectiveness and achieve an institutional breakthrough along the lines of what transpired in East Central Europe in 1989-1991 (p. 181).

Post-Yanukovich Ukraine would need to reconstruct itself by choosing either the Polish or Czechoslovak models. Regretfully, none of these models was chosen as a sole option. In the critical moment in February 2014 Ukraine followed both models, Polish and Czechoslovak. This contradiction is partially responsible for the rise of separatist movements, oligarchic coercion and slow reforms process.

The sixth, somewhat more optimistic, response by Caterina Filippini studies the development of constitution and constitutional procedures in Ukraine. Focusing on constitutional processes, on the ways of its drafting, approving and (non)implementation, Filippini tells the story of the highly problematic legitimation of political and socio-economic order in Ukraine. She shows that all attempts of advancement of Ukraine were halted also at the level of constitutional process. But her conclusion looks more optimistic than her arguments and data: "The constitutional laboratory of Ukraine seems really never ending." (p. 134).

The correctness of these words was proved by the 2014-2015 constitutional process. Even revolution and war did not change the instincts of the political elites in Kyiv. As in the recent case of the decentralization package for changes to Constitution, the public Constitutional commission – whose members consist of recognized experts and statesmen – does not have any influence on the real process of drafting and decision-making. The real decision-making is being made by several financial-political groups behind the doors and without inclusive consultative process. It is highly questionable if their constitutional changes will last long.

To sum up, the co-authors of the publication have some sort of consensus: Ukraine was constantly transforming itself during the times of independence; but this transformation did not bring real advancement. There is still a need and an opportunity for the nation to initiate the change.

2. *Intellectual Skills and Sense of Civic Responsibility*

The second question is about the real change in 'mentality', intellectual skills, and sense of civic responsibility. The answers to this question are provided by the authors writing on religion, literature and language.

In their papers Myroslav Marynovych, F. Iwan Dacko and Oleh Turiy show how the attempts to modernize religious policies in Ukraine were failing, and some Soviet practices returned into the toolkit of Ukrainian politicians. Even though religious freedoms in Ukraine were incomparably better than in Soviet Union – Marynovych maintains –, state favoritism remained as a policy testifying to the “restoration of a quasi-soviet system in Ukraine” (p. 63).

By discussing languages’ and identities’ issues Michael A. Moser, Nadiya Trach, Alois Woldan, Alessandro Achilli and Simone A. Bellezza also point to the self-contradictory changes in intellectual skills and civic spirit of Ukrainians. Problems, forms and contents of the Soviet cultural context have constantly been re-emerging in the socio-cultural agenda of independent Ukraine. Whatever aspect these scholars would take into account (be it language policies, the literary canon or historical memory), it looks like an ‘eternal return’ to the same issues is what shapes Ukraine’s recent cultural development.

Finally, Marco Pavlyshyn assesses changes in post-Soviet Ukraine by applying a post-colonial paradigm. Pavlyshyn accurately defines the postcolonial position as both a world-view and an ethical position that is needed by colonized and colonizer simultaneously; and it can be practiced only together:

Postcoloniality as a world-view and an ethical position ... remains as remote as ever. Only a few participants acknowledge the need for an accommodation between colonizer and colonized so that they may graduate to the status of former colonizer and colonized (p. 284).

Yet attempts of making progress on that account between Ukrainians and Russians were not successful in 1991-2012. And what happened afterwards makes this perspective even more distant.

So the collective answer seems to be that Ukrainian society was making difference, but it was not changing in its attempts at modernization in 1991-2012.

3. *Corruption*

The third question deals with assessing the impact that corruption made ‘in most branches of social, political and economic life’, and foremost within civil society. This issue is hard to separate from the last question posed by the book’s editors, “[h]ow may civil society overcome the open attacks launched by the Yanukovich era onto the most vital organs of education, media, political life?”

I have found three direct answers to these two questions. One is provided by Mykhailo Gonchar who analyzes corruption in the energy sector. Gonchar points to the fact that corruption was growing in economy due to internal and international groups’ interests. By lobbying for their interests, these players were making a coercive impact on political competition and government’s practices. In his radical conclusion, Mykhailo Gonchar claims that by giving up to these influences Kyiv lost its chance “to steer itself towards a different

type of civilization” (p. 99). In this statement Gonchar – as many among Ukrainians – articulates the popular belief that the only way to seize corruption in Ukraine is with a change of “civilization” by the very act of joining EU and NATO.

A more rational account on the nature of Ukrainian corruption, its root causes and consequences is the one provided by political analysts Volodymyr Horbach and Oleksandr Paliy. Using parliamentary elections of 2012 as an example, Volodymyr Horbach focuses on the chain reaction of corruption in a society: financial groups corrupt political groups, corruption leads to monopoly, and monopoly leads to the vertical of power. Yanukovych’s failure to create a constitutional majority as a result of 2012 parliamentary elections is interpreted as a hint for optimism. Horbach concludes that his optimism is connected with the fact that these elections were still competitive, unlike those in other former Soviet Union countries (p. 170).

The competitiveness in 2012 parliamentary elections is also analyzed in the paper by Oleksandr Paliy. Paliy states that there was an un-even spread of civil society strength in Ukraine that resulted in higher political competition in the Western regions. At the same time, the weakness of civil society in the East brought a victory of authoritarian currents. Nonetheless, Paliy’s general assessment of Ukrainian civil society is quite positive:

Civil society underwent deep changes and a clear increase in political experience has become apparent (p. 157).

Based on this assessment, Oleksandr Paliy has rightly predicted 2013 to be a year of struggle between civil society and the “ruinous instincts of governmental authorities” (p. 164).

So the authors disagree about the possibilities for internal agents (be it civil society, economic and/or political players) to change the situation with corruption in Ukraine.

4. *Ukrainian Ulysses’ Choice*

Some of the papers mentioned above provide almost prophetic answers, as they actually foresee the socio-political development of Ukraine in 2013-2015. But I also find this editorial question to have a foretelling force: “What are the chances of the opposition to find some kind of cohesive discourse and a pragmatic way to bring the country out of the stormy waters between the ‘Russian Scylla’ and the ‘nativist Charybdis?’”

In the course of 2014 Ukraine has managed to be damaged by both monsters, and to find a third one. Some territorial communities of Ukraine are now under direct or indirect control of Russia. The nativist choice is represented, on the other hand, by Kyiv’s Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO), a unique way of inefficient response to the emergencies of war and separatism. The third option, i.e. the European choice, remains in the sphere of virtual politics, with the signed but not implemented economic and political parts of Association Agreement. Today, in many economic and security issues Kyiv is dependent on decisions made in Brussels and Washington. Against their will, Ukrainians are again in a situation of non-made choice.

The prehistory of this situation is very well described by Kataryna and Roman Wolczuk in their powerful analysis of Ukraine's experience of regional integration. They rightly point out that "[u]p until recently, Ukraine has been able to exploit this dualism" (p. 27) between the European and Eurasian integration. But in the second decade of 21st century the era of flexibility has come to an end:

The effectiveness of this approach has declined as the demands of the integration processes in both spheres have increased... [The] political consensus on the dualistic approach has begun to break down as the integration regimes become ever more advanced and demanding resulting in disunity amongst key domestic actors (p. 28).

Pietro Grilli di Cortona and Barbara Pisciotta focus on the same processes but with different subjects: how regional integration influenced state- and nation-building in Ukraine. Based on their analysis of these complex tendencies in 1991-2012, they conclude:

Today Ukraine is a country deeply divided between the West and Russia. This polarization means that the processes of state-building and nation-building are not positively correlated, as showed the role played by Russia in threatening the Ukraine's national sovereignty and territorial integrity (p. 114).

This threat for national sovereignty materialized in 2014, causing a trauma that will define Ukraine's development for the rest of the 21st century.

5. *Overcoming Soviet Legacy*

I have the impression that almost all the contributors to the book have mentioned the problem of Ukraine's Soviet legacy and how to deal with it. As far as the answers to this question are concerned, we can single out two groups: one finds Ukrainian development to be doomed by Soviet practices, habits and survived institutions; the second describes independent Ukraine as a place of conflict and co-operation between old and new practices.

Yurii Scherbak and Yevhen Zakharov represent the first group. Thus Scherbak outlines several attempts of 'improving' Soviet Ukraine. He insists that Soviet Ukraine was an 'industrial giant' and a 'political Lilliputian'. The uniqueness of the independence era relied in an unprecedented opportunity for Ukrainians to take responsibility for themselves. Ukraine tried to escape from the 'Empire' by accelerating state-building and joining the 'security architecture of Europe', but failed in institutionalizing these attempts (Scherbak, p. 220-221). The transformations of the last 20 years did not lead to any stable results: re-Sovietization was still going on after a brave attempt, especially in the times of Yanukovych presidency.

Yevhen Zakharov (p. 44) is just as pessimistic as Yurii Scherbak. He argues that

Communism in Ukraine had not been defeated. Ukrainian society, ravaged by the mass political repressions of the 1937-39, was split into 'easterners' and 'westerners': it was

psychologically not ready for independence, and incapable of effecting a change in the political elite. The Soviet administrative and governance system, with all its inherent contradictions, was retained. Virtually the entire former political elite stayed in control at all levels of power.

A second group of authors is more open to see some novelty in post-Soviet Ukraine. Among others, Pietro Grilli di Cortona and Barbara Pisciotta describe the history of independent Ukraine without recognizing the Soviet legacy to be that dominant. First of all,

Despite the hard Soviet legacy, Ukraine demonstrated many conditions favoring democracy: an educated workforce, a strong industry and agriculture, and a proximity to Europe (p. 102).

In Grilli di Cortona and Pisciotta's analysis independent Ukraine is described as a history of transformations having new type, not necessarily oriented to the Soviet past, but also leading away from freedoms. The two Italian scholars show that the Yanukovich regime was just another period in a sad story of anti-democratic development:

In 2012 the situation was very different. The imperative of institution-building to create a new modern and democratic state was subordinated to the personal interests of accumulation and perpetuation of political power and financial wealth ... In brief, the shortcomings of Ukraine's democratic experience to date are putting its future democratic development at risk (p. 103).

Soviet totalitarianism is just one of many forms of non-democratic policies. Non-Soviet does not necessarily mean democratic.

Marta Dyczok also describes the era of independent Ukraine as a time in which economic and political innovations hinder civil freedoms. Dyczok analyzed the 20 years-long history of Ukrainian mass media. The media sphere was a totally new domain of public life in post-Soviet Ukraine. Yet again, the Soviet legacy in cooperation with oligarchic ownership over media made the new media sphere serve an authoritarian case:

In fact, private media outlets work hand in hand with the state in limiting information from circulating, creating a new, hybrid threat (p. 142).

So in Dyczok's analysis the Soviet past is described as just one of the many factors defining Ukrainian development.

These differences in treating the Soviet legacy are also present in the contemporary discourse of Ukrainian studies. The Euromaidan, Russo-Ukrainian war and annexation of Crimea were expected to change the impact of Soviet forms and contents upon Ukrainian development. But the way the Ukrainian political system is now being reconstructed ('decentralization' that provides central government with more power, 'deoligarchization' that creates new oligarchic clans etc.) shows that this expectation was probably unrealistic.

In my opinion, the academic, expert and political papers collected in the book *Ukraine twenty years after independence* are worth of reading for all the specialists in different aspects of Ukrainian studies as well as for Ukrainian political leaders. The first group may find useful information on pre-Maidan Ukraine, as well as well-argued conclusions on the causes of Ukraine's questionable development. The second group may learn a good lesson from the country's recent past: there was a time when Ukrainian power elites could have established institutions enabling democratic consolidation, as well as more inclusive and fair socio-economic and political system. The latter would have strengthened Ukrainian sovereignty, and destroyed the preconditions that led to the hell of the current war.

Abstract

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The article discusses the major theses of the authors of the book *Ukraine Twenty Years After Independence*. The author analyzes the ways scholars and intellectuals assessed Ukraine's perspectives right before the Euromaidan. The author argues that the book represents a valuable sample of scholarly wisdom and miscalculation.

Keywords

Ukraine; Maidan; Political Science.