

# Ukraine: Understanding Semi-Peripheral Statehood in a post-Soviet Context

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*Abstract: The fast-changing events in Ukraine evoke once more the question of how to understand the Ukrainian state. Instead of following concepts that depict Ukraine as “weak”, “captured”, or “incomplete”, I propose to analyse the Ukrainian state as “a social relation”. Applying this Poulantzian understanding enables us to link the state in a narrow sense with society and thus permits analysis of its transformation. Approaches focusing on the shortcomings of the state dominate analyses of contemporary Ukraine, but fail to take into account the conflicts within the state. They consider the specific regional legacies purely in negative terms and presume the superiority of an idealised Western state model while denying its historical origins. A Poulantzian approach allows us to see the Ukrainian state in the context of the international political economy by understanding the Ukrainian oligarchs as a transnational internal bourgeoisie and mapping international influence via the category of interiorisation. The national discourse, whilst an important element of establishing hegemony, needs to be overcome. Distinguishing between the “good” West (the EU and the USA) and the “bad” East (Russia) contributes to obscuring socio-economic problems in Ukraine.*

## 1. Current Struggles over the State in Ukraine

The current struggles in Ukraine started with President Viktor Yanukovich’s rejection of the association agreement with the European Union (EU) in late November 2013. Ever since then, events have evolved at such speed that it has been difficult to keep up with the latest developments. Still, this article aims to provide an analytical framework for a better understanding of the current situation in Ukraine. To begin with, I will briefly put the protests centred against Yanukovich and his regime into a larger politico-economic context, before moving on to an analysis of the Ukrainian state.

After he took over the presidency in February 2010, Yanukovich not only started to build up an authoritarian system in Ukraine, he also proceeded to enrich himself and his “family”. He put his political adversary Yulia Tymoshenko in prison for alleged misuse of

power and refused to release her, even when the EU demanded this as a condition for signing the association agreement. Very soon after Yanukovich authorised violence against the demonstrators on the Maidan in early December 2013, the protests turned more clearly against him and his politics. The main motivation for protest shifted from support of the pro-European association agreement to a general dissatisfaction with the political regime. The state measures against the protesters – the adoption of an anti-protest law, intensified violence against protesters, their hijacking and torturing – culminated in the killing of a hundred people and injuring of more than a thousand people during the events of February 18-20, 2014. In the end, Yanukovich was impeached and an interim government formed. As I am writing this paper in early March 2014, we are witnessing a conflict with Russia on the issue of Crimea that is seeing a rekindling of cold war rhetoric.

Against this background, in order to be able to identify political solutions for the current situation, it is essential to take a look at the social forces within Ukraine, as well as their economic embeddedness internationally. This leads me to the overall question of how these developments can be grasped in theoretical terms. In other words, how can we understand the Ukrainian state? I will argue that the Poulantzian concept of the state as a social relation is helpful in answering this question because it enables us to understand the transformation of the state within its international dimension, with the inclusion of a political economy perspective. I will start by reviewing the literature that analyses different concepts used to understand the Ukrainian state. I will then proceed by introducing a historical-materialist perspective on the state. In the final part, I go on to highlight the benefits of applying a Poulantzian approach when analysing a post-Soviet country like Ukraine.

## **2. Popular Concepts of the Ukrainian State and their Blind Spots**

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In this section, I focus on the main concepts of the state employed by scholars who work on Ukraine. I scrutinize them drawing on Alke Jenss' three points of criticism regarding the dominant analysis of peripheral states. She argues that peripheral states are frequently analysed as failed, weak, or captured states. Her first criticism is that the established approaches ignore the fact that the state itself depicts a power relation. This makes it impossible to pay due attention to the asymmetric power relations within the state. Secondly, Jenss insists that the specific historical origins in the European Enlightenment and developmental contexts of the Western European model of an ideal state need to be taken into account, because it shows that this "ideal" state was enforced in a violent manner. Thirdly, she points out that alternative forms of state transformation, which do not aim for modernisation or rationalisation, are not considered in the existing literature. Jenss concludes that the dominant approaches and concepts fail to explain why a state transforms. I will now turn to applying Jenss' criticisms to the dominant approaches used in analysing the Ukrainian state.

### *2.1 The Western Liberal Democratic State As the Ideal State*

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Ukraine started to exist as an independent state in December 1991. During more than two decades of its existence, scholarly discussions on how the Ukrainian state developed covered a spectrum of different concepts that put its “weakness” in the centre. Taras Kuzio highlighted this idea of weakness thus: “All four contributors [to this special issue of *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*] talk of Ukraine as a “weak state” that is derived from Soviet inherited legacies of informal politics, patronage and corruption” (“The Ukrainian” 413). The state is considered to be weak because the rule of law and the government’s accountability are not fully developed; informal rules and patrimonialism prevail instead (Kudelia 417f; “The Ukrainian” 413). In the same vein, Serhiy Kudelia describes the Ukrainian state as “incomplete” and without a “stable political order and effective governance” (418).

Another prominent concept is the one of “state capture” (see Hellman and Kaufmann) used by international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Hellmann and Kaufmann “define state capture as the efforts of firms to shape the laws, policies, and regulations of the state to their own advantage by providing illicit private gains to public officials” and see it as a “*fundamental cause* of poor governance” (n.p., italics in original). Kuzio speaks of a weak “state capacity” that together with a weak national identity influences civil society in a negative way: “Under state capacity one understands the ability of state institutions to determine and enforce rules for politics and society” (“Staatskapazität” 51, my own translation). Nevertheless, Ukraine has never been classified as a “failed state” (Kudelia) although the Maidan protests have given rise to a number of assessments that it is now threatening to become one (see, e.g., Aleksashenko; Saradzhyan).

This omnipresent concept of weakness derives from the idea that the Western liberal democratic state is the ideal which all states should aim to achieve. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, development towards this ideal indeed came to be considered inevitable (see Fukuyama). However, this claim ignores the diversity of power relations in Western states which also need to be kept in mind. Furthermore, the above-mentioned governance approach assumes that both state and non-state actors are per se interested in problem solving. It does not consider any other motive that lies behind their action as for example the preservation of power. Another problem of the (multi-level-) governance literature is that questions of efficiency receive far more attention than questions of democracy (see Bache and Flinders; Buckel, Georgi, Kannankulam and Wissel). Therefore, relating to Ukraine as a “weak state” only serves to point out its lack of liberal democracy.

What these different approaches have in common is a neutral, simplified understanding of the state; the state is regarded as something external to society. It is depicted as being opposed to strong elite networks, which are considered non-state actors who enrich themselves through corruption. The approaches are based on the assumption that the state aims for the common good, which denies the fact that there are always different interests competing for influence over the state apparatuses. Thus Kudelia treats power

relations as an “add-on” when he “uses a micro-level approach to the process of state-building with an emphasis on power struggles between various actors within the state and a rational choice focus on the incentive structure of various actors” (417).

The overlap of the economic and political sphere, for example when “so-called oligarchs manipul[at] policy formation and even shap[e] the emerging rules of the game to their own, very substantial advantage” (Hellman and Kaufmann n.p.) is dismissed as simply corrupt and not requiring further analysis. Although empirically interesting analyses on the oligarchs exist, they do not offer an elaborated conceptual view on the state (see Pleines). Kudelia speaks of a “purposeful choice of self-interested and insecure elites” (417f). I argue that one has to conceptualize the oligarchs’ actions not merely as corruption, but rather as a systematic attempt to gain – or stay in – power. Instead of only highlighting that “decentralized elite networks and the dominance of informal rules lock the state in a dysfunctional equilibrium” (Kudelia 417), one has to ask for whom the state is functional or dysfunctional, and why.

That a state can function for some of its citizens and not for others is pointed out by the concept of the “blackmail state”, first introduced by Keith Darden (2001) and also applied to Ukraine by Mykola Riabchuk. It also uses the ideal state as a template, but makes an important point that the “blackmail state” is actually rather stable and strong. “Over time, [...] the post-Soviet elites [...] gained a substantial wealth through shadow privatization and other dubious deals; learned how to manipulate elections, mass media, and political opponents; and transformed eventually the state weakness into a specific strength that meant primarily methods and scopes of coercion” (Riabchuk, “Agony” 23). Furthermore, the concept of a “blackmail state” can help explain how corruption is actually carried out and makes it clear that the law is not equal for everybody. According to Riabchuk, only a stronger civil society, a non-homogenous elite, and international pressure could change the “blackmail state” (“Agony”).

## *2.2 The Historical Development of the Ideal (West European) State*

All the concepts discussed above ignore the historical origins and contingency of the “ideal” Western state, which emerged together with capitalism. Bourgeois capitalist societies need the state in order to ensure the economic conditions favourable to them (Brand 147), or, as Joachim Becker puts it: “The bourgeois state is not a neutral entity” (10, my own translation). It is as functional for a particular social class as the “blackmail state” is for oligarchs. It is therefore important to examine under what conditions the establishment of the bourgeois state and the evolution of the capitalist mode of production happened.

According to Marx (741-792), primitive accumulation was constitutive for the formation of the capitalist mode of production. It includes processes of violent dispossession secured by laws such as the “enclosure” of the common land in Britain. By privatizing what had previously been common land on which poorer farmers depended for grazing, hay, wood, etc., the livelihoods of many English peasants were destroyed. The displaced rural

populations then became cheap labour for the emerging industries. This process exemplifies the active role of the state in securing the means of production to the detriment of the local population.

Current processes of accumulation feature this aspect of increasing inequality in the post-Soviet context. The Ukrainian elite, described as “[r]oving bandits” by Kuzio (“The Ukrainian” 413), benefited hugely from the privatisation measures undertaken since the 1990s (see Matuszak). “The imperatives of institution-building were subordinated to the personal interest of accumulation and perpetuation of political power and financial wealth” (Kudelia 417). These processes refer to the emergence of a capitalistic system in the post-Soviet state and have to be analysed as such.

### *2.3 Specific Features of the post-Soviet Semi-periphery*

Whilst in the above-mentioned approaches, the European Union is seen as “the good”, Russia is classified as “the bad”. “[...] Ukraine represents probably the most ambiguous case, being neither a clear-cut success story – like its postcommunist neighbors to the west, nor a complete failure – like its neighbors in the east” (Riabchuk, “Ukraine’s ‘muddling through’” 439). Riabchuk defines two main identities in Ukraine that influence the development of the state: the “Ukrainian national” or “Central East European” on the one hand and the “Little Russian”, “post/crypto-Soviet”, or “East Slavonic” on the other. Following Shulman (2005), Riabchuk specifies the latter identities as closer to Russia, which is perceived as “non-democratic and non-capitalistic”, “with strong collectivistic and authoritarian roots” (“Ukraine’s ‘muddling through’” 444) while the former represents the opposite. As mentioned above, however, Riabchuk does not question the “set of Western liberal-democratic values as ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ for Ukrainians (yet allegedly ‘alien’ for Russians)” (“Ukraine’s ‘muddling through’” 443f). By referring to Soviet legacies most analysis tie in with the Soviet past. However, they only take their negative side into account and deny any possible positive heritage of this past.

## **3. An Alternative Approach: The State as a Social Relation**

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An alternative to the approaches just discussed above is offered by Nicos Poulantzas’ idea of the state as a social relation. Poulantzas developed a Marxist understanding of the state which underlines the struggles and their materialisation within the state. The state neither constitutes the instrument of the ruling class, nor is it neutral or represents the common good (see Jessop). Hence, according to Poulantzas, the state “*is rather a relationship of forces, or more precisely the material condensation of such a relationship among classes and class fractions, such as this is expressed within the State in a necessarily specific form*” (“State” 128f, italics in original). Consequently, the state can be regarded as a terrain of struggles where different power relations materialise in state apparatuses (see Brand).

However, not only class but also other structural categories such as gender, race and ethnicity, have to be considered. Several authors following the Poulantzian perspective developed it further (see, for example, Gallas, Bretthauer, Kannankulam and Stützle). For instance, from a feminist point of view, the capitalist state is also patriarchal: it is

therefore necessary to analyse the male domination of and within the state (see Sauer). Sonja Buckel, Fabian Georgi, John Kannankulam and Jens Wissel (2014) emphasise the entanglement of structural categories in their examination of migration in Europe. Moreover, the understanding of the state as a social relation has been fruitfully applied in studies on non-OECD countries, mostly in the Global South (see Ata ç, Lenner and Schaffar ).

Poulantzas' concept of "interiorisation" considers internal and external factors regarding different power relations. He developed it in the 1970s when discussing the economic and political development of Portugal, Greece, and Spain. He was interested in how these countries were embedded in imperialism, and to what extent the end of the dictatorships in Southern Europe was influenced by, or linked to, the changes in external forces. Poulantzas highlighted that

there is really no such thing as external factors, on the one hand, acting purely from 'outside', and opposed to internal factors 'isolated' in their own 'space' and outclassing the others. If we maintain the primacy of internal factors, we simply mean that those coordinates of the imperialist chain that are 'external' to a country – the global balance of forces, the role of a particular great power, etc. – only act on the country in question by way of their internalization[1], i.e. by their articulation to its own specific contradictions. But these contradictions themselves, in certain aspects, represent the induced reproduction of the contradictions of the imperialist chain within the various individual countries. (22)

Particularly important for the understanding of the state is the existence of different factions within the ruling class who try to enforce their interests. The interior bourgeoisie – defined as being interwoven with foreign capital, but having its material base within the nation state – became increasingly important in Poulantzas' analysis besides the national and comprador bourgeoisie. Due to the nation state's integrating character, external interests get interiorised within it. Speaking of the notion of a transnational internal bourgeoisie describes more adequately today's globalised relations: "internationalisation is – and this is Poulantzas' innovation – a process which primarily occurs within nation states" (Wissel 243, my own translation).

Following this Poulantzian theoretical tradition, the historical materialist analysis of politics (HMPA) represents the most recent suggestion for an operationalization of the relationship of social forces within the state. HMPA combines Poulantzas' state theory with Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. According to the latter, hegemony is based on both consensus and coercion. Central in HMPA are the so-called "projects of hegemony" that are not yet hegemonial but are in the process of trying to become it. For their analysis, the context, the actors and their strategies, as well as the processes of establishing hegemony have to be brought into focus (see Buckel, Georgi, Kannankulam and Wissel).

#### **4. Implications for the Analysis of Ukraine as a Semi-Peripheral State**

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I will now proceed to propose how Ukraine may be analysed as a social relation. I will start by briefly explaining what it means to understand Ukraine as a semi-periphery, elaborate on social forces within Ukraine, and conclude by highlighting some crucial features which need to be taken into account when examining a post-Soviet state.

As already mentioned, the question of transformation has to be taken seriously and cannot simply be put down to a “weak state”. This requires that social forces and therefore class – an absent category in most studies on post-Soviet states – have to be considered. One scholar whose work shows the benefit of including class in the analysis of privatisation processes in Ukraine is Yuliya Yurchenko. She regards the Ukrainian oligarchs as a transnational class and underlines that approaches that are usually used in the Ukrainian context “fail to explain the reasons for the socio-political change in the country; partly due to the implied assumption of homogeneity of interests within those forces, partly due to insufficient attention to the complexity of the state-capital dialectic in independent Ukraine” (127).

Characterising Ukraine as semi-peripheral implies that the country is neither part of the centre nor of the periphery. As a post-Soviet country Ukraine does not fit into the world's division in the Global South and the Global North. There are hardly any studies on the post-Soviet region from a Poulantzian perspective, however, Becker's approach can help to get some insights for the analysis of Ukraine as semi-periphery. According to Becker, there is a special form of statehood in the Global South whose strategic selectivities[2] differ from the Global North because patronage plays an important role in politics and civil society is rather weak. Drawing on Evers (1977), Becker defines passive extraversion and structural heterogeneity as specific characteristics of peripheral states. To Becker, structural heterogeneity implies not only co-existence of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production but also high levels of unemployment amongst the poor urban population. Passive extraversion stands for dependency on imports (of goods and services, productive capital, and monetary capital) and is accompanied by dependency on foreign technologies. Moreover, the industrial key sectors but also the banking and infrastructure sectors are dominated by foreign capital. Also, there often exists a strong dependency on the export of natural resources. However, according to Becker, one of the main differences between peripheral and semi-peripheral states is that the latter have high numbers of waged workers owing to industrialisation.

Although Ukraine is an industrialised country, some characteristics of the periphery can still be found. The banking sector, for instance, has a high share of foreign capital. The Ukrainian transnational internal bourgeoisie, however, is relatively strong, despite some of its members' dependency on Russian capital (see Matuszak). The most important sectors of the Ukrainian economy are metallurgy, gas and oil, and parts of the machine building and the food industry, which also constitute the core business of the Ukrainian oligarchs since the privatisation of these industries in the 1990s (see Pleines). Regarding the agricultural sector, Ukraine is one of the major exporters of grain in the world although a large part of the Ukrainian population relies on its own produce for food security (see Schaffartzik, Plank and Brad). In general, exports mostly go to the

Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (about 25%), and to Russia, the EU, and Asia (each about 17%). Regarding imports, roughly one-fourth originates from both the EU and Russia respectively, and one-third from the CIS (Ukraine-Analysen 8).

The latest events in Ukraine have been motivated by discontent with the patronage-based system, increasing socio-economic inequalities and an increasingly authoritarian system. However, this dissatisfaction does not only stem from Yanukovich's regime and his Party of Regions, but also from the involvement of the oppositional parties Udar and Batkivshina with business clans. Consequently, the right wing forces of Svoboda and the "right sector" in general, which publicly dissociate themselves from the support of any oligarch, have benefited from this discontent with the mainstream political parties. Moreover, the rhetorical emphasis of the increasingly strong nationalist discourse on the differences between the Eastern and Western halves of the country, and between Russian and Ukrainian, further destabilises the Ukrainian state. This is not a new phenomenon in Ukraine, where, for example, laws on the national language have previously been used to distract from the severe socio-economic problems. Nevertheless, this instrumentalisation of this discourse has to be taken into account in the analysis of how hegemony is exerted. Similarly, the (monetary) support of political parties by oligarchs and the oligarchs' decision to let Yanukovich fall has to be analysed.

It would, of course, be wrong to focus exclusively on the oligarchs or the right extremists. However, their power should not be underestimated. An obvious example of the transformation of the Ukrainian state through social forces is that in today's interim government there are also some new faces, including some from the Maidan. Yet this is only a first step of the transformation by social forces since the reform process recently launched by the people of the Maidan demands not only a change of the political leadership, but also of the rules of politics.

Witnessing today's conflict on Crimea, the picture of "bad Russia" and "good Europe" is hard to escape. However, and without wanting to defend Vladimir Putin's imperialist moves on Ukraine, it is important to point out that not only Russia but the West, too, has imperialist interests – for example, in securing Ukraine as a trade partner. Nevertheless, in many analyses of the conflict, the "catch-up perspective" prevails, which sees the establishment of an "ideal European state" with a functioning rule of law as the only desirable outcome. "For the people living in these countries [of the former socialist bloc], Europe is still a vision, an ideal, utopia. They believe in Europe but often ignore its rules" (Yermolenko 2). From the perspective of the pro-European protesters on the Maidan, the EU can help Ukraine get rid of the corrupt political system. Some see that the EU, however, to some extent, actually has been supporting this system. The entanglement of the EU governments with the Ukrainian political and economic elite is the reason why it took a long time to impose measures against some Ukrainian oligarchs in terms of freezing their capital and imposing visa restrictions. However, the Maidan protesters opt for the "lesser evil" and would thus prefer to be the periphery within the EU than outside of it.



It is necessary to go beyond an overly simplistic “East vs. West” discourse in order to address question of a transnational internal bourgeoisie and the instrumentalisation of nationalism adequately. The dominant approaches regarding the endorsement of IMF loans as the solution to save Ukraine from bankruptcy and the signing of the association agreement and the free trade agreement with the EU need to be scrutinized critically. The conditions of the loans and the question of who will benefit most from the free trade agreement require careful analysis.

## 5. Conclusion

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Ukraine is situated geographically, but also economically, in-between the European Union and Russia. For this reason, a trilateral solution might be beneficial for the country. The oligarchs successfully pursued a strategy of undertaking economic relations with both sides during the last years. Now it would be essential that the Ukrainian people benefit from these economic relations as well. An understanding of Ukraine as a social relation enables us to address state-society relations and therefore to analyse the overall change. Considering the oligarchs a transnational internal bourgeoisie allows us to put them in the context of international economy and to analyse how they are interwoven with international capital. Further, even if the focus is on the ruling class, the dominated people have to be taken into account in order to know how hegemony is established. Finally, the historical development of the state, not only its negative but also positive legacies have to be considered.

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<sup>1</sup> "Interiorisation" was translated as "internalization" in this edition of *The Crisis of the Dictatorships*.

2. Strategic selectivities shape the nature of the state. They link structure to agency and relate agency to structure (see Jessop).

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