

In Search of a Common Political Project: Understanding Ukraine's Post-Soviet Path

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Abstract:

Mikhail Minakov's book *Development and Dystopia: Studies in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Eastern Europe* sheds new light on Ukraine's post-soviet and most recent development by using an innovative approach, which combines philosophical reflections and data-rich empirical research. In four thematic sections, the study covers topics ranging from the historical evolvement of oligarchic groups, systemic corruption, and the role of 'dystopian' language in the public sphere to geopolitical imaginaries of (Anti)-Maidan protesters. Being an involved observer, the author provides timely analysis and convincingly succeeds in situating the Ukrainian case within broader philosophical and theoretical debates.

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Six years after the severe political crisis following the 'Euromaidan' mass mobilizations, Ukrainian politicians continue to struggle with both ending the war in the Donbas area and establishing a new social contract with its citizens. In 2019, an unprecedented majority of Ukrainians expressed their discontent by electing comedian and political newcomer Volodymyr Zelensky as president. So, why did the regime change in 2013-14, similarly to the Orange Revolution in 2004, fail to foster more trust in and less corruption of politicians? How did oligarchic groups create their influence on Ukrainian politics? Why is it remarkable that Volodymyr Zelensky promotes an inclusive Ukrainian citizenship beyond linguistic markers and geopolitical orientations and which implications are to be drawn from the strong influence of civil society organizations in contemporary Ukraine?

Answers to these questions can be found in Mikhail Minakov's book *Development and Dystopia. Studies in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Eastern Europe*. Embracing 16 chapters organized in four thematic sections, it is not a typical monograph but strives to combine philosophical reflections on Ukraine's post-soviet development with empirical research and practical (policy) suggestions. This approach reflects the author's professional background: having worked as professor of philosophy at Kyiv-Mohyla Academia, he currently combines his scholarly work with a position at Kennan Institute, a major American think tank.

The first part of the book situates the post-soviet development of Ukraine within a context of demodernization tendencies in Europe. Minakov suggests that the fast pace of modernization, which fundamentally changed the texture of post-Soviet societies in the 1990s, resulted in disorientation and ultimately lead to a reverse development. The current state, he argues, borrowing terms of Jürgen Habermas, can be characterized as a *double colonization*, where the

system and the *lifeworld* mutually restrain their respective scope of action. This colonization is most visible in the processes of systemic corruption and is accompanied by dystopia (p. 19-56). This dystopia comprises a peculiar, binary language juxtaposing 'East' and 'West' or 'Russian-speaking' and 'Ukrainian speaking' citizens. In Minakov's view, these divides are merely symbolic and serve to legitimize political elites. Due to essentialist language, a conservative ideology – another major concept referred to throughout the book – is reproduced and substitutes open debates about divergent ideological orientations (p. 57-72).

Minakov's crucial finding that the Ukrainian Revolutions in 2004 and 2014 did not limit the Language of Dystopia, but contributed to strengthening it, anticipates the concept of *revolutionary cycles*, elaborated in the second part of the book. The notion of *revolutionary cycles* entails moments of mass mobilization that created hope for change but repeatedly led to a re-establishment of the pre-existent political order (p. 105-121). Minakov identifies the failed attempts to limit the influence of oligarchic groups as a major pitfall here. Drawing on rich primary data, he traces the historical evolution of these regional clans from Soviet time until the present (p. 122-150).

The last two parts of the book focus on the most recent period since the Euromaidan. The chapter on images of the West and Russia amongst Maidan and Anti-Maidan protesters finds that these geopolitical imaginaries played a crucial role for protest mobilization. Minakov argues that the protester's thinking can be best described as utopian, developing visions of social change and the will to act, yet lacking a concrete strategy. The author concludes that the importance of geopolitical imaginaries for the protesters' political positioning is symptomatic for the weakness of their politico-ideological thinking (p. 175-192).

Utopian thinking is likewise prevalent amongst supporters of the Novorossiia Myth from the unrecognized post-soviet entities in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. Scrutinizing their discussions in social networks, Minakov categorizes them into an imperialist group favoring unification with Russia and a transnationalist group which imagines a multiethnic Novorossiian polity. The transnationalist group shares the feeling of being marginalized by its titular nations and could, as the author argues, be important for a positive political development in the region if the respective states manage to include it (p. 264-285).

Similarly revealing is Minakov's critical account of the role of civil society organizations and volunteer groups, which have increasingly come to fulfill state functions. Thus, in the author's view, they have provided valuable if not indispensable support to the state, yet at the same time overstretched their legitimate area of responsibility (p. 193-220).

Minakov's book is rich in both philosophical reflections and first-hand empirical material. He succeeds in approaching topics at the heart of scholarship on Ukraine and offers slightly different perspectives. The combination of empirical studies and meta-level reflections— not all of which can be discussed in this review – is often thought-provoking and situates the Ukrainian case within broader philosophical and theoretical debates. Yet, the broad scope of topics is both a strength and minor weakness of the book. Being an involved follower and commentator of Ukrainian events, Minakov provides a range of interesting details and insights. At times, however, some of the shorter chapters, for instance on post-soviet parliamentarism, remain on the surface and fail to refer to the relevant existing research. Furthermore, the book could have benefitted from a concluding chapter in order to conflate empirical evidence and philosophical concepts more thoroughly. This minor criticism aside, *Development and Dystopia* is a valuable contribution to the field of Eastern European Studies, as it sheds new light on many topics by adopting an innovative approach. The book is an illuminating read for experienced scholars, students, and everyone who wants to get first-hand insights into Ukrainian politics and society.

Auf der Suche nach einem gemeinsamen Politischen Projekt: Annäherungen an die post-sowjetische Entwicklung der Ukraine

German Abstract:

Mikhail Minakovs Buch *Development and Dystopia. Studies in post-Soviet Ukraine and Eastern Europe* eröffnet neue Perspektiven auf die post-sowjetische sowie aktuelle Entwicklung der Ukraine indem es philosophische Reflektionen mit empirisch gesättigten Studien verbindet. In vier thematischen Abschnitten widmet sich die Studie der historischen Entwicklung der oligarchischen Gruppen, der systemischen Korruption und der Rolle der 'dystopischen' Sprache im öffentlichen Raum, aber auch den geopolitischen Vorstellungswelten der (Anti)-Maidan Protestierenden. Als involvierter Beobachter liefert der Autor hochaktuelle Analysen und verortet den ukrainischen Fall überzeugend in breiteren philosophischen und theoretischen Debatten.