

## **Europe's periphery at the centre of attention, or: Contextualizing Ukraine - too much, too fast?**

Paul Vickers

**Abstract:**

This collection of essays explores events in Kyiv (Kiev) and Crimea in 2013/14 and their historical, social, political, cultural, and legal contexts. The seventeen multi-disciplinary contributions, covering sociology, history, media studies, international relations, political science, and law, are by academics and non-academics, including journalists, activists, legal experts, and policymakers. The Polish National Research Centre (NCN) sponsored the publication, thus most authors are Polish-based, although scholars from the US, UK, Sweden, and Germany also contribute. Bachmann and Lyubashenko edited the volume into August 2014, while the texts reach President Petro Poroshenko's election on 25 May 2014. The editors claim they "wanted the book to be an intervention during the crisis" (p. 17).

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## **Europe's periphery at the centre of attention, or: Contextualizing Ukraine - too much, too fast?**

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Bachmann, Klaus; Igor Lyubashenko (Hg.): *The Maidan Uprising, Separatism and Foreign Intervention: Ukraine's complex transition.* (Studies in Political Transition, vol. 4.) Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014. 523 S., Hardcover, €64.95. ISBN: 9783631654569

Previously peripheral, Ukraine has been a centre of global attention since the initial Euromaidan protests of November 2013 escalated. President Yanukovich fled on 21 February 2014 following dozens of deaths in Kyiv; Crimea held an independence referendum on 16 March, which Russia recognized before taking control of the peninsula; and before President Poroshenko's election on 25 May, separatist movements emerged in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, triggering ongoing conflicts. A flood of academic work is joining the deluge of media coverage, something reflected locally in Giessen University's 2014/15 President's Lecture Series on "conflict regions" in Europe's east.

The seventeen essays were published in October 2014 and edited by Polish-based scholars Klaus Bachmann (a German) and Igor Lyubashenko (a Ukrainian). Over 500 pages they seek to provide context and background through multiple disciplinary perspectives, including political science, sociology, economics, international relations, history, and law. The contributions from academics – mostly Polish-based, but also by others active in the US, UK, Germany and Sweden – and non-academics, including activists, journalists, legal experts, and policymakers, cover events before the 25 May elections.

Exploring Ukraine's crises, the book queries simplified explanations that cite linguistic divisions (p. 9-10) or, as noted in conclusion, the "assumption, according to which the Maidan represented the whole country and manifested the commitment of all Ukrainians to the EU" (p. 451). The editors' central objective, though, is challenging "asymmetry" in knowledge. They ask why agenda setting and the promotion of specific media frames from Moscow met less resistance than the same efforts undertaken by the government in Kyiv and its supporters? "We claim that this happened because the crisis in Ukraine confronted policy advisers, media workers, intellectuals and academics in Western Europe with a huge asymmetry between a swiftly available and overwhelmingly broad knowledge about Russia and a scarce, scattered knowledge about Ukraine [...]. It is this gap which our book wants to fill." (p. 10)

Whether the "propaganda campaign staged by the Russian government" (p. 453) has been that influential is something the editors' own essay finds only "circumstantial evidence" for (p.

364). Still, the insufficiency of knowledge on Ukraine has been evident since November 2013. The editors thus "wanted the book to be an intervention during the crisis", (p. 17) which necessitated speedy publication.

Andrzej Szeptycki's opening essay, outlining Ukraine's history post-1991, signals the volume's political focus while manifesting normative assumptions about "civil society's" role on Maidan, declaring it symbolic of Ukraine's transition towards Western models. (p. 33) This assumption also resounds in Maciej Wapiński's essay exploring the 2004 Orange Revolution for traces of civil society (p. 43) and Ukraine's "nascent middle class" (p. 59). Co-editor Lyubashenko's largely chronological contribution on Maidan also privileges civil society while overlooking protests outside Kyiv.

Questioning linguistic divisions' centrality, Balcer's essay instead outlines longer-term historical and imperial legacies' influence on Ukraine today. This essay would be more useful positioned earlier in the volume since its extensive historical scope outlines the origins of Ukraine's division into West, East, South, and Central Ukraine, plus Crimea, which feature throughout the book. Balcer's radical conclusion that "divergence between north and south [sic!] plays a much more important role than the division between east and west" (p. 117) is unsubstantiated, while suddenly making "the north" a separate region is confusing. His informative essay remains bound to binary division, discounting the "diversity in each of these micro-regions" that he posited (p. 102).

Christensen's article already seems dated, as Tymoshenko's Fatherland party came sixth in October 2014 parliamentary elections. Mandzy's essay on the nationalist Svoboda party and Right Sector militia provides a problematically partial background to Ukrainian nationalism amongst data on voting patterns and opinion polls. In fervently dismissing Russian claims about "fascist" Ukraine, the essay's academic value is accordingly depleted.

The volume's clearest and best-written essay then follows – Torbakov's insightful contribution on "contested identities". Though concluding with normative assumptions regarding "European values", ascribed to Ukraine rather than an orientalized Russia (p. 203), he highlights the complex of past and present entanglements, with Ukrainian and Crimean spaces' place in Russian cultural memory explored perceptively. Useinov and Shapovalova's essays on Crimea, however, offer little more than basic background knowledge.

Domaradzki's perceptive essay considers the West, and not only Russia, as an agent of 'foreign intervention'. Though discussion of NATO (pp. 267-277) largely reproduces diplomatic and political chronologies, the analysis of EU incoherence and disruption of Ukraine's geopolitical balancing act is sharp. Domaradzki notes "the question remains whether the European approach appropriately estimates the impact of the oligarchic economy, level of corruption, the influence of pro-Russian interests and the social and cultural characteristics that determine Ukrainian reality" (p. 287). The prevalent Cold War analogy is thus challenged, (p. 293) with Ukraine and Russia's economic intertwining, particularly in energy, highlighted alongside EU

blindness to this reality (pp. 295-7). Sparrow's essay, meanwhile, offers a neatly-structured overview of US policy towards Ukraine, focusing on publicly available statements.

Following Domaradzki's critical insight comes Przełomiec's unfortunately hubristic article. Praising Poland for supporting Ukraine against Russia despite historical Ukrainian crimes against Poles, she also Polonizes Habsburg-ruled Galicia, claiming "according to the 1910 census, Lviv had 206,000 citizens among whom 175,560 were Polish and 21,570 were Ukrainian" (p. 318). Conflating language and identity when 28% of the population was Jewish in 1910 is troubling and inverts the volume's broader arguments regarding those same questions in Ukraine.

Bachmann and Lyubashenko explore mass media and 'propaganda', ultimately bifurcating positive Ukrainian social-media use by actors from below, with important caveats (pp. 376-7), and Russian state actors' mass media manipulation (p. 364). Though critiquing Western media's reproduction of Maidan's self-created image where "protesters represented the Ukrainian nation and society" (p. 364), the editors' main concern is "the circumstantial evidence" of "a centrally organised and co-ordinated campaign steered by the Russian government" (p. 364).

Legal expert Kamiński lucidly outlines international organizations' scope in transitional justice, considering whether the ICC, ECHR, UN, and Council of Europe can judge Russian "aggression" (p. 386) and Ukrainian and separatist "war crimes" (p. 446). Bachmann's sprawling concluding essay overlaps in discussing the ICC but provides solid background for future studies on transitional justice, detailing decisions during and after Yanukovich's fall (p. 427 ff.).

This volume is unlikely to stand out among recent publications on Ukraine. The speed and dynamism of events, alongside the book's 500-plus-page length and high price, means it was unlikely to constitute an "intervention". While important for scholars from the region contributing to debates, hence English-language publication, whether the Polish National Research Centre (NCN) allocated funding wisely here is debateable. Additional time, plus greater proofreading resources, may have brought some improvement, but the underlying shortcomings of *The Maidan Uprising, Separatism and Foreign Intervention* are structural and content-based. Many gaps in knowledge remain open, while beyond the declaration that the book comprises "four thematic parts" (p. 11), there is no evidence of this. Such sections would have perhaps helped readers and the editors alike find greater clarity and avoid the book's significant overlaps.

Beyond Domaradzki and Torbakov's excellent contributions, Bachmann and Lyubashenko's volume cannot be recommended as essential background reading for scholars from multiple disciplines covering the Ukraine crises, their contexts and consequences.