

FORUM

## The proxy war in Ukraine History, political economy, and representations

*Chris Hann*

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Overwhelming empathy with all the civilians and conscripts who have suffered from the ongoing violence in Ukraine, which began years before the Russian invasion of February 2022, must be complemented by analysis and explanation. What can anthropologists contribute? I have been disappointed by one-sided accounts endorsing the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky and the cause of the Ukrainian nation that have dominated in the Western mass media and anglophone academic work, including that of anthropologists. From an anthropological perspective, to invoke international law and sacralize political sovereignty is inadequate (Hann 2023; Malinowski 1944). Instead, we need to scrutinize the complex history of the Ukrainian nation, which is being consummated through the present violence. We need to recognize that Zelensky heads an Atlanticist, market-oriented, nationalist regime of dubious legitimacy. This critical stance does not mean deference to the Kremlin in the spirit of the “realist school” of international relations. It does mean recalling that as late as autumn 2021 President Vladimir Putin was putting forward proposals for a peaceful resolution of the crisis brought about by Western geopolitical and economic ambitions since the end of the Cold War. For the Russian political classes (not just for Putin and his oligarchical allies), when it came to NATO expansion Ukraine was a unique red line. However, too many interest groups in

Washington as well as in Kyiv actually *wanted* the war that began in February 2022 (though this could not be declared publicly).

This essay explores the history and political economy that form the background to this tragic proxy war. It then looks more closely at representations, contrasting contemporary appeals to European values and “normal” European states with Mikhail Gorbachev’s vision at the end of the Cold War of a “common European home.” The essay concludes with fresh data indicating that dominant representations of the war were being questioned in neighboring East-Central European states in 2023. To draw attention to the historical intertwining of the eastern Slavonic peoples is not to endorse the ideological historiography of Putin or his repressive and corrupt regime. Similarly, to suggest that an EU pariah of populist-nationalists in Budapest is propagating an accurate diagnosis of the geopolitical nexus that lies behind the proxy war in Ukraine is not to commend that regime.

### History

The history of Ukraine is not the same thing as the history of the Ukrainians as a people. I am sympathetic to textbooks that include coverage of all the different peoples that have inhabited this space through time, in addition to the dominant elements (e.g., Magocsi 2010). When



it comes to writing the histories of particular peoples, anthropologists have long abandoned notions of primordialism. Instead, they have demonstrated, generally in settings outside Europe, how ethnic groups and boundaries are socially constructed (Barth 1969). Within Europe, the strength of national identities and their presumed immutability has impeded recognition of this plasticity. It is inconsistent to criticize primordialism while joining international lawyers and political actors in the cartographic reification of peoples and boundaries. Postcolonial studies and general theories of decoloniality (sometimes declaring their perspective to be from the “Global South” but propagated primarily through anglophone academia) are blunt instruments to grasp the complexities of post-socialist East-Central Europe. These bodies of theory are commonly invoked to justify viewing the Ukrainian people as a long-term “stateless nation,” the perpetual colonial victim of Russia, which according to this narrative is currently seeking to restore its imperial domination over a significant part of Ukrainian sovereign territory.

Such accounts do not pass muster. Since the Middle Ages, several other, more distinctly foreign powers (i.e., states with languages and belief systems quite different from those of the eastern Slavs) have exercised domination in lands currently considered Ukrainian. These include the empires of the Mongols, the Ottoman Turks, and the Austrian Habsburgs. Incorporation into Lithuania and then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (also an imperial formation of a kind) had far-reaching effects on the language and social structure of eastern Slav subjects in what is now Belarus and western Ukraine. The origins of peoplehood in the larger eastern Slavonic ethnolinguistic population are complex (Plokhy 2006). Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus can invoke the same medieval origins in their national historiographies. But in the absence of continuous statehood and its associated social structure, forging a modern national consciousness in the last two was always going to be a formidable task.

The distinction between “historical” and “young” or “nonhistorical” peoples is helpful here. This does not mean denying Ukraine and Ukrainians their history and agency (see von Hagen 1995 and responses). But the consolidation of a modern national identity is much harder in cases where even intellectuals committed to the cause acknowledge that the polity they desire requires new foundations to be constructed, including vital cultural work (Rudnytsky 1981). Poland lost its statehood during the partitions, but here a nationalist movement thrived throughout the nineteenth century thanks to social strata that had no equivalent among eastern Slavs living outside the Russian Empire. The first stirrings of Ukrainian nationalism are found inside that empire, where they were repressed. As a result of Vienna’s pragmatic need to counterbalance Polish aspirations in the province of Galicia, ideas and aspirations originating in Russian Ukraine took root in the Habsburg Empire. A strong nationalism was incubated in Galicia in the last decades of the Habsburgs, the premise of which was that Ukrainians differed as much from Russians as they did from Poles. This *exclusive* understanding of peoplehood was not replicated elsewhere in the vast territories that came to be classified as Ukrainian, which included zones of steppe having only tenuous links to the old eastern Slavonic core. In Donbas, relations with immigrant Russians who made up most of the new industrial workforce were fluid, as they were in adjacent regions with distinctive Cossack traditions (Plokhy 2012).

The distinction between an *exclusionary* national consciousness in the west and *inclusive* combinations of regionalism and rapprochement with Russian speakers in most of the rest of the country persisted in the twentieth century. During the interwar decades, eastern Galicia was appropriated by the resurgent Polish polity. Ukrainian nationalism reached a climax during World War II and will forever be linked to the violent leadership of Stepan Bandera. After the war, at Stalin’s behest, the former eastern Galicia was definitively incorporated into the autonomous

republic of Ukraine. The Soviet Union was characterized by high levels of mobility, geographical as well as social. When it collapsed, ethnic Russians made up fully one quarter of the Ukrainian population. But census statistics are a poor guide to the strength of ethno-national identity in either majority or minority groups. In the referendum of March 1991, a large majority of Ukrainians voted against proclaiming sovereignty and in favor of maintaining a union with the Russian Federation and other units of the USSR. This scheme collapsed due to the intransigence of Ukrainian elites and the political implosion of Russia in August 1991. Only after the coup attempt in Moscow did the population of Ukraine vote in a further referendum to declare sovereignty. We know that regional loyalties and frictions remained significant in the 1990s (Hrytsak 2005). What we do not yet know for sure is whether the proxy war that began with the invasion by Russian forces in February 2022 has brought about a permanent hardening of the ethnic boundary between Ukrainians and Russians throughout the country, in other words the triumph of the *exclusionary* type of identification; this seems highly probable in the wake of the violence.

The affinities between Russia and Ukraine based on shared history might be compared with those found in Scandinavia, or perhaps on the Iberian Peninsula. Unfortunately, Western policies since the collapse of the Soviet Union have consistently prized these neighbors apart. While Kyiv was invited to support NATO-led interventions and awarded “preferential partner” status by the EU, the former superpower enemy was increasingly excluded, both economically and politically. This in turn strengthened the hand of nationalist, anti-Western currents inside Russia. It was as if the leaders of the European Economic Community in the 1970s, following the end of Iberian fascism, had leaned over backward to recruit Lisbon while excluding Madrid. Contrary to the assurances given to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990, NATO expanded steadily eastward. Ukraine differed from other states of Central and Eastern Europe, and from

the ex-Soviet republics bordering the Baltic Sea, for reasons that had much to do with proximities of language and religion in their shared entangled histories; these are surely factors to which sociocultural anthropologists should attach weight. In any case, post-Soviet Ukraine was constitutionally committed to neutrality.

Independent Ukraine experienced two decades of democratic oscillation between pro-Western and pro-Russian camps before power in Kyiv swung decisively to the former following the Maidan uprising of 2013–2014. In the West this is hailed as a popular revolution, provoked by President Viktor Yanukovich’s decision (hardly voluntary) to pursue closer integration with Moscow’s Eurasian Union rather than the EU. The West-oriented camp was consistently more successful in mobilizing “civil society” than its rival, which was depicted as trapped in post-Soviet oligarchical corruption. The appeal of the West was greatest to those who were young and potentially mobile. It remains the case, however, that Yanukovich, whose electoral stronghold was in eastern Ukraine, was removed by a putsch rather than a democratic election (the involvement of the CIA and Victoria Nuland is well known). Of course, according to international law Russia’s ensuing annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in Donbas were just as inadmissible. De facto, with neutrality now dropped from the constitution, Ukraine was increasingly integrated into NATO. Attempts by foreign leaders to broker peace were not taken seriously by the nationalists who now dominated in Kyiv, who were unwilling to consider any concessions to federalism.

When it became clear that the pro-Western government of Petro Poroshenko was just as corrupt as that of his predecessor, he was succeeded as president in 2019 by Volodymyr Zelensky. The electorate trusted the popular television personality’s promises to reconcile factions and promote a lasting peace. Zelensky had no mandate for rushing the country into membership of either the EU or of NATO. Early efforts to implement the Minsk agreements and move in the direction of a more inclusive Ukrainian society

that would embrace all its east Slav citizens were abandoned due to nationalist pressure. Instead, military expenditure was ratcheted upward, while Russia-oriented oligarchs were persecuted and the entire population experienced cuts in social protection and civil liberties.<sup>1</sup> Zelensky himself has long been beholden to oligarchs, and he has indulged a habit of allocating key positions to their nominees as well as to chums from his schooldays. An alliance has seemingly been struck between old-school nationalists who revere Stepan Bandera and a new generation of “liberals” whose long-term goals include radical privatization, EU accession, and full NATO membership. These elites are skilled in mobilizing “civil society,” an undertaking for which they receive every possible assistance from the West.

When Washington ignored the proposals advanced by Russia in late 2021, the die was cast for the botched invasion of February 2022. We shall perhaps never know for sure at which point in time President Zelensky began privately to reckon with the dreadful eventuality of invasion. Were it not for the war, it is more than likely that his personal ratings would have continued to plummet, as did those of his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko. Thanks to the war, this supremely gifted individual has successfully recast Ukrainian national identity, anchored his country definitively in the geopolitical West—and kept himself in office, at least for the time being. Zelensky has been encouraged by the West to fight for as long as it takes to reclaim every inch of sovereign territory, whether or not it was occupied historically by eastern Slavonic people. This is a recipe for endless bloodshed and ultimately nuclear escalation. In these circumstances, humanist anthropologists should not be lining up behind NATO but listening instead to those few voices daring to criticize its expansionist agenda.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Cui bono?***

The above historical sketch emphasized rival understandings of peoplehood in history and

ignored political economy. But the economic anthropologist will always ask: *cui bono?* It seems obvious that the main “winner” of the present war is the United States (Hudson 2022). After the embarrassments of the Trump years, Washington has reemerged as the unchallenged hegemon of the Free West. In symbolic political performances seldom witnessed even at the height of the Cold War, it can summon its NATO partners to meetings at a US air base on German soil (whereas Soviet troops withdrew from Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War, there was no symmetry in the West). US military spending expanded dramatically during the “war on terror” to levels far exceeding expenditure at the height of the Cold War. By 2010 it was estimated that the US military budget was approximately 19 times the size of that of the Russian Federation (Streck 2023: 127n6). American corporations have profited not just through sales of weapons and other equipment to Ukraine but in the long term by shifting the energy flows of the EU away from Russian extractivism toward allegedly greener Western alternatives. Meanwhile, if and when a peace can be negotiated, it will eventually be the wealthy members of the EU and not the US that foot the bill for rebuilding everything that is currently being destroyed in Donbas and elsewhere. In short, although national capitalism (see Hart 2024) has been gradually retreating in the face of globalization, states remain crucial actors and the US military-industrial complex has never been stronger.

Inside Ukraine, Zelensky and the political class he leads are enthusiasts of the free market and private property. This is an ideology that often has diametrically opposed consequences on the ground. It is claimed, for example, that the privatization of energy markets will lead to greater efficiency and weaken the power of the oligarchs. But the case of Hunter Biden (swept under the carpet by Western liberals because it was initially highlighted by Donald Trump, for his own squalid political reasons) is pertinent here. What has really changed if the lavish rents to be gained from Ukrainian energy mar-

kets go to the dissolute son of an important US politician rather than to post-Soviet oligarchs? The nationalists ostensibly seeking to free their country from centuries of imperialism are in fact creating the conditions for yet another empire to dominate their country.

From the point of view of workers and consumers in Ukraine, geopolitics and political economy are thoroughly intertwined. As with the strength of national identification, economic prospects are unevenly distributed. They tend to be most positive where national sentiment is strongest. The capital and a few other large cities, above all L'viv, have the most to gain from tighter integration into Western markets. But the economic future of large areas of the east, above all Donbas, depends on supplying goods to the Russian military-industrial complex (small compared to that of the US but nonetheless significant in an economy otherwise highly dependent on the extraction of natural resources). It is reasonable to suppose that those whose material livelihoods continue to depend on their integration into the post-Soviet economy will be the most fearful of breakneck integration into a western free trade zone.<sup>3</sup> The evidence from other former socialist countries, including Poland, shows that this integration can have many negative consequences. Regional inequalities in Ukraine are already greater than the cleavage that developed after 1990 between Poland A and Poland B, which continues to fuel right-wing populism among the disadvantaged and to shape electoral outcomes.

Finally, we also need to consider the political economy of the Russian Federation. Its continued dependence on sales of oil and gas is commonly described as the “resource curse,” because it enables the state to evade the need for reform in both economic policy and governance (Etkind 2022). This endowment could theoretically become a source for prudent investment in the manner of Norway’s sovereign wealth fund. Instead, the West’s exclusionary policies have cemented neo-feudal oligarchies throughout the Russian political economy. Antiquated technologies are used to manufacture

goods that are uncompetitive on world markets. For Alexander Etkind, the only way to modernize Russia ecologically as well as politically is to defeat Putin and open up Russia to capitalist modernity. This analysis is not merely to take a very naive view of how capitalist political economy respects the environment in the throes of the “green transition.” It precludes the possibility that Russians are capable of organizing their state (or civilization) on the basis of values that differ from those of the United States. This possibility is dear to many Russians, some of whom loathe the President Putin; it should also be dear to sociocultural anthropologists.

## Representations

In addition to the light they can shed on peoplehood and on the political economy that structures violence materially, anthropologists have a long record of investigating *representations*. I have in mind not the rewriting of national history and reconstruction of the symbolic landscape of Ukrainian nationalism, processes that are undoubtedly expanding in the course of the current war.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I draw attention here to dominant Western narratives that celebrate a brave, united people that wishes to be part of a Free West, where it is perceived to belong. Alas, it has been held back by the dark forces of Russian neocolonialism and nostalgia for the USSR. These imaginaries are pervasive, also in academic literature, and anthropologists are by no means immune. In these representations, the neoliberal West is projected as the sole model of modernity or *normality*. Poland, formerly an imperial power in East-Central Europe, has embraced modernity in this sense and forged a new relation of equality with the Kyiv government. But the Russian Federation has yet to take this step. According to the well-known US historian Timothy Snyder (2022), military defeat in Ukraine is the precondition for taming the former superpower and enabling it to qualify one day as a “normal” post-imperialist European country.

What exactly is meant here by “normal European country”? The phrase implies similarity and a condition of equality that has never pertained in reality. Are Malta and Luxemburg the equivalents of Germany and France? Washington’s stance has been to refuse to acknowledge the Russian Federation as the successor to the USSR, a superpower on the Eurasian landmass. It has suited the US to humiliate Moscow. The wider demonization of the Russian people (not just the leadership) in Western media has been pushed to absurd, sometimes racist extremes. Russians are barbaric “others” who have nothing in common with the Ukrainians. Only the latter qualify, by virtue of their allegedly different values, for membership of the European family. The imaginary promoted by Ursula von der Leyen, head of the European Commission, is identical with that propagated by Ukrainian nationalists. How far their degradation of Russia and all things Russian has penetrated in Ukrainian society will become clear only when the guns have fallen silent.

I have followed the war as closely as possible through public media in my native Britain. Coverage by the BBC has been consistently embarrassing. Only once on Channel 4 News did I see a clip from Donbas in which a local resident told the British journalist in no uncertain terms that the West was responsible for wrecking his lifeworld. The scene quickly moved on to a neighbor who scoffed at what had just been uttered and repeated the mantra about misdeeds by invading Russians. Pro-Ukrainian enthusiasm was fanned by the Churchillian posturing of Boris Johnson in his successive visits to Kyiv and photo-calls with Zelensky (best seen as a repugnant strategy to shore up Johnson’s failing premiership). If it is indeed true that Johnson personally encouraged Zelensky in April 2022 to continue the war at a moment when there was a realistic opportunity for negotiation, then Britain bears a heavy responsibility for everything that has taken place since (including the formal annexation by Russia of further Ukrainian territory, a significant step that could have been averted).

I am also a citizen of Germany and have followed media coverage there. It has been no better than that of Britain. Anyone suspected of “understanding” the Russian perspective is shunned in polite liberal society. If you suggest that destruction of a vital gas pipeline between Russia and Germany in the Baltic Sea was very likely due to US sabotage, you are thought to be peddling crazy conspiracy theories. Liberal politicians have been especially prominent in heaping opprobrium on Moscow, in complete ignorance of the history and geography of the region (I recall a minister who visited Odessa, always a predominantly Russian-speaking city, and hailed it as the cradle of Ukrainian national culture). A handful of retired Bundeswehr personnel (notably Harald Kujat) have done more than elected politicians to offer more informed accounts and reflect views widely held in the German population. Claiming the moral high ground is especially important in Germany, where Putin has long been caricatured as the contemporary equivalent of Adolf Hitler. No opportunity is lost to uncover yet another Russian war crime (though no one with any knowledge of the history of Ukrainian nationalism imagines that their military is any less brutal). The Bundestag has declared the Holodomor a genocide against the Ukrainian people (though other peoples suffered similarly as a result of Stalin’s disastrous collectivization policies and a targeting of Ukrainians has never been proven). Bellicose Greens with no experience of conscription let alone warfare are rushing to increase defense budgets and kowtow to US leadership.

Anthropological representations of this war raise further issues. There was a tendency in the anglophone literature on Eastern Europe in the socialist era to jettison the discipline’s norm of respect for other forms of life in favor of a simple logic: these people are fundamentally Europeans like us; if only they had not been subject to centuries of Tsarist autocracy and Soviet totalitarianism, they would have made the choices and progress we have made; it is now our duty to do everything we can to help them fulfil their destiny, which is none other than our modernity

(see Thelen 2011). If it should seem that local communities (or at any rate large segments of them) continue to attach high value to what the USSR provided in terms of welfare and security, this can only be a pitiful aberration. The phenomenon of pro-Soviet nostalgia is amply documented by anthropologists (Humphrey 1998; Konstantinov 2015). For many, especially those forced to migrate, or whose social mobility was restricted in successor states busy institutionalizing an exclusive national identity they did not share, the sentiments of loss extend to profound cultural subjectivities. Rather than view such sentiments as a product of backwardness and coercive dependence, we need to consider the possibility that this nostalgia is evidence of values that differ from those of Western elites (not necessarily from those of the broader population). We need to take seriously the possibility of forms of modernity that diverge from the blueprints of neoliberal capitalism. Whether such alternative modernities have solid foundations in the beliefs and values of citizens can be determined only through fieldwork, the opportunities for which are likely to remain limited in Ukraine for many years to come.

It cannot be the task of sociocultural anthropology to endorse antiquated notions of national sovereignty and the expansionist programs of the winning side of the Cold War. In the spirit of Bronisław Malinowski (1944), we should be calling for a general downgrading of states and their borders. One appropriate starting point would be the imaginary of a “common European home/house,” as proposed by the late Mikhail Gorbachev. Whatever the tactical reasons behind his rhetoric in the 1980s, this was a vision that the great majority of Europeans found attractive, in the West and the East alike. At the time, Gorbachev expected the Soviet Union to persist in some new form. There was no question for him of creating a mosaic of equally sovereign states across the entire macro-region, but there was a firm commitment to cooperation and an absolute rejection of violence. This scenario has failed to materialize. The Russian Federation has been repeatedly rebuffed by

the EU, while Ukraine has been selected for inclusion. As argued above, the policy of driving a wedge between eastern Slavonic neighbors was misguided from the start. Poland has been at loggerheads with Brussels for many years, but it is the most loyal ally of the United States, which has reneged on Gorbachev’s aspirations for the sake of expanding the frontiers of NATO and neoliberal capitalism.

### **Hungary: A normal European country?**

The case of Hungary under Viktor Orbán has shown how neoliberal privatization and marketization policies can give way to systematic political interventions to promote the interests of a new domestic bourgeoisie, fan the flames of populist nationalism, and undermine liberal checks and balances (Fabry 2019; Scheiring 2020). Given the similarities to the Ukrainian trajectory, given Hungary’s pariah status within the EU, and given the existence of a small Hungarian minority in the Ukrainian province of Transcarpathia (once upon a time territory governed from Budapest), it is instructive to examine how the war in Ukraine is perceived in Hungary. My vantage point is Kiskunhalas, a small town in the south near the Serbian border that I have been visiting for many years.

During fieldwork in August and September 2023, one issue featured regularly in the news on state-controlled television. Hungary (like neighboring states sharing a border with Ukraine) was determined to reject an EU directive to allow the resumption of Ukrainian grain imports. The “dumping” of large quantities of grain from their eastern neighbor was alleged to be inconsistent with the maintenance of quality controls and the main cause of lower prices for the products of their own farmers. In the Hungarian media, it was emphasized that this was not to be perceived as a move against ordinary citizens of Ukraine. The profits of post-socialist agribusiness in that country accrued mainly to the US corporations that have bought up the land, a process that would not be possible in Hungary.

Media manipulation in Orbán's Hungary is extreme. My left-liberal friends in Budapest assume that everything disseminated in state media is suspect. Some take it for granted that my perspective on the war is that of the vast majority of Western Europeans. They are embarrassed by the fact that their own government is sucking up to Moscow and frequently criticizes the nationalist policies of Kyiv as they impact on the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. It is awkward for me to explain that, in my view, in this particular nexus of political economy, the Hungarian authorities are putting forward an accurate diagnosis. Orbán has regularly argued that the violence could be stopped promptly if only Washington would abandon its policy of NATO enlargement and agree to negotiations. I have been struck by how many Hungarian citizens share this view. Liberals will say that this is because they are bombarded with Putin-friendly propaganda in the media. But can a traditionally anti-Russian population be so easily brainwashed? It is not just a matter of material interests, i.e. assuring Hungarian consumers cheap energy and farmers high grain prices. Along with distaste for Zelensky and the new elites in Kyiv, suspicion of a Western imperialist agenda is becoming widespread. As I have argued above, both are warranted.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have argued, looking in turn at history, contemporary political economy, and media representations, that violence in Ukraine has escalated to a proxy war that is to a high degree the responsibility of the West. Anthropologists have had a lot to say concerning the nature of national identity or peoplehood. Their constructivist approaches can be supplemented in East-Central Europe by the distinction, long commonplace in historical scholarship, between historical and nonhistorical peoples. Classifying Ukraine as a long-term colony of Russia and Russian military action as neocolonialism are gross oversimplifications of a complex history.

They camouflage deeper causes of the present violence.

The expansion of NATO is intimately tied up with the activities of Western corporations. It goes without saying that the major manufacturers of armaments have received a huge boost (reflected in their stock exchange valuations). Large sectors of the Ukrainian economy, including agriculture and energy, were welcoming foreign capital years before the invasion of 2022. The transformation of the old socialist economy resembles earlier developments in Eastern Europe and the political outcomes are likely to be at least as discomfiting as those we have seen in the countries of the Visegrád Cooperation in recent years.

In discussing representations, I focused on imaginaries of Europe and the distinction between Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a "common European home" and the current Western policy to coerce the Russian Federation into conforming to the template of a "normal European country," meaning a state that is open to global capital on Western terms. In reality, the states of the EU are very far from equal, and neither separately nor in combination can they begin to challenge the US. The right to determine who qualifies as a "normal" European country remains shrouded in hypocrisy, both inside and outside the macro-region. Why should the criteria be determined by the economic interests and geopolitical agendas of the US? The determination to force a military defeat of Russia, to be followed by reparations and Nuremberg-style trials, creates a real risk of nuclear catastrophe.

In this catastrophic situation, the most optimistic prospect for Ukraine in the longer term is a depopulating society resembling that found in the Visegrád states today: exporting labor to the West, welcoming foreign capital, and electing noisy nationalists who rail against the disintegration of family life and deploy their EU development funds to support a new domestic bourgeoisie. The trailblazing illiberal regime of Viktor Orbán recognizes and protests this scenario because it fears being upstaged by a powerful rival. This is the new norm for post-socialist



European states, while Russia is degraded and excluded from the moral community of Europe altogether. All in all, this is a disappointing end to the aspirations of Gorbachev and everyone else who hoped for something different and better when the Cold War was concluded.

## Acknowledgments

This essay originated as a section of an article submitted in response to a call for a special issue of the journal *Ethnologia Polona* focusing on “(dis)engagement and ideology in anthropological research.” The call was inspired by the violence in Ukraine. Following criticisms by anonymous reviewers, I removed the section titled “Political economy.” That was not enough to save my paper from rejection by the guest editors of the issue (two American anthropologists). The emasculated version of the article has since been published elsewhere (Hann 2023). The present essay is based on the text that was deleted but also draws on the published paper and Hann (forthcoming), where fuller references are provided.

## Notes

1. Even US-based Freedom House, an NGO at the forefront of efforts to promote “transparency” and Western standards before and after the Maidan, acknowledges persistent shortcomings. The war has served as a convenient excuse for further repression of civil liberties. In its 2023 report, Freedom House classified Ukraine as “partly free” and awarded the country 50 points out of a possible 100 (FH 2023).
2. I have found the work of Wolfgang Streeck consistently illuminating, from his insights into the military and geopolitical context to his critique of the rise of “ultranationalism” in Kyiv (see, e.g., Streeck 2023 and, in English, his frequent contributions to *Sidecar*; see also Skidelsky 2023).
3. It has been shown that, following the Maidan revolution, in Donbas economic prospects were more significant than national sentiment in explaining separatist mobilization (Zhukov 2016).
4. Pro-Western forces have aggressively nationalized history text-books and “heritage.” As an example of their success in disseminating national history abroad, I noticed at a recent performance in Cambridge of the second of Beethoven’s celebrated Razumovsky string quartets that Count Andrey Razumovsky, patron of the composer and ambassador of the Tsar in Vienna, is now described as Ukrainian rather than Russian. This seems anachronistic in 1806 and hardly compatible with the world view of an aristocrat who went on to play a key role in the partitioning of Poland. The Razumovskys were a Cossack family who exemplified the historical complexity noted above. The former banker Viktor Yushchenko promoted their nationalist heritagization during his years as prime minister and president.

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