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The Politics of Ukraine

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Introduction

Since declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine has charted a turbulent yet inspiring course toward forging its own political identity and establishing democratic institutions. Emerging from the shadows of a one-party, centrally planned state, Ukraine's journey to democracy has been complicated by historical legacies, persistent challenges of governance, and the ongoing contest for its national direction. The aspiration for self-determination and effective statehood, however, has remained constant, driving Ukrainians through periods of political upheaval, economic upheaval, and moments of profound national unity.

The roots of Ukraine's political culture run deep, influenced by centuries under varying empires, as well as by brief glimpses of autonomy. Foreign domination—by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, the Habsburgs, and then the Soviet Union—left a legacy of both division and resilience. The trauma of events like the Holodomor famine and political repression under the USSR coexisted with an enduring drive for national identity. These experiences have shaped Ukraine's ongoing efforts to develop inclusive state structures and political practices responsive to its diverse population.

The transition from Soviet rule was neither smooth nor linear. Ukraine inherited a complex and fragmented political system, colored by competing visions for the nation's future and hampered by economic crises. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Ukraine's politics were marked by struggles over the concentration of power, shifting alliances between president and parliament, and intense competition among emerging political elites. The new era brought democratic elections, but also challenges such as pervasive corruption, the influence of oligarchs, and regional divides.

Pivotal movements and moments—the Orange Revolution of 2004, the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014, and repeated standoffs over integration with Europe—have all significantly shaped Ukraine's political landscape. These uprisings, led by determined civil society actors, have underscored Ukrainians' enduring demand for accountable and democratic governance. At the same time, Ukraine's geopolitics have been profoundly affected by its relationship with Russia, culminating in the annexation of Crimea, the war in the east, and, most recently, the full-scale Russian invasion, which has placed immense strain on the political system.

Amid these adversities, Ukraine continues to strive for the consolidation of democracy, the rule of law, a responsive system of local governance, and effective anti-corruption mechanisms. The quest for reform and European integration remains at the heart of

its political agenda, even while war wields enormous challenges on every level. The resilience of Ukrainian civil society, the adaptiveness of its institutions, and the unity forged under external threat have all become defining features of the nation's current political moment.

This book offers a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of Ukraine. Through an examination of the country's historical context, institutional design, key political actors, and broader societal currents, readers will gain a nuanced understanding of the forces shaping Ukraine's political evolution. By understanding both the triumphs and trials of Ukraine's journey, we can better appreciate the complexities and promise of Ukrainian democracy in a changing world.

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CHAPTER ONE: Historical Roots of Ukrainian Statehood

The story of Ukrainian statehood is a long and winding one, stretching back centuries before the familiar borders of the modern nation appeared on any map. It's a narrative less of continuous, unbroken statehood and more of persistent aspirations, fleeting moments of autonomy, and the deep cultural currents that flowed through the lands that would eventually become Ukraine. To understand the politics of Ukraine today, we need to rewind the tape and look at the foundational elements laid down in the mists of time.

Our journey begins with the East Slavic tribes who settled in the region after the 4th century. Kyiv emerged as a prominent center, a town destined for a significant role in the political destiny of these lands. The political organization of these early communities is a bit murky to modern eyes, as they didn't have the elaborate state structures we might recognize. However, the groundwork for something larger was being laid.

Then came the Varangians, often associated with Vikings, who arrived from the north. They played a key role in the formation of a medieval state known as Rus', centered around Kyiv, by the 9th century. This entity, often referred to as Kievan Rus', became one of the most powerful and culturally advanced states in Europe during the 10th and 11th centuries. Under rulers like Volodymyr the Great and Yaroslav the Wise, who brought Christianity to the land, Kievan Rus' developed political institutions and reached a "golden age."

The political structure of Kievan Rus' wasn't a centralized monarchy in the modern sense. It was more akin to a federation of principalities, all ruled by members of the Rurik dynasty. The Grand Prince in Kyiv held a form of supreme authority, but local princes in other significant towns like Novgorod, Chernihiv, and Smolensk also wielded considerable power in their territories. Succession wasn't always straightforward, often leading to internal conflicts among the Rurikid princes, which gradually weakened the state.

The system of governance involved the prince and his *druzhina*, a retinue of warriors who protected his interests. The most elite members of the *druzhina* were the *boyars*, who were often landowners. The princes relied on councils of these trusted men for advice and administration. Revenues came from tribute or taxes collected from the territories, which were then used in trade. While the princes had authority, the *boyars* also held significant sway, often acting as autonomous leaders in their own right.

The political landscape of Kievan Rus' was also shaped by its economic activities, particularly trade routes connecting the Baltic and Black Seas. Kyiv's strategic location on the Dnieper River made it a vital hub for this commerce. The need to secure these trade routes contributed to the development of fortifications and administrative centers.

However, the decentralized nature of Kievan Rus' and internal squabbles made it vulnerable. In the 13th century, the Mongol invasion dealt a devastating blow, particularly to the heartlands around Kyiv. While much of the territory fell under Mongol control, a successor state, the Kingdom of Ruthenia (Galicia-Volhynia), emerged in the western lands, preserving some of the Rus' political and cultural traditions.

Following the decline of Kievan Rus' and the impact of the Mongol invasion, the political map of the region underwent significant changes. In the 14th and 15th centuries, Ukrainian territories were gradually incorporated into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland. This period marked a shift in the political trajectory of these lands, as they became part of larger, powerful monarchies.

The Union of Lublin in 1569 created the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and a large portion of what is now Ukraine came under the direct control of the Polish Crown. This brought new administrative and legal systems, and with it, increased Polish influence. While the formal governance was Polish-Lithuanian, the majority of the population in these territories were Orthodox East Slavs.

It was in this context that a new and distinctly Ukrainian phenomenon emerged: the Cossacks. These were semi-autonomous communities of peasant warriors who began to form in the 15th century, often in the frontier regions. Escaped serfs seeking freedom, they developed unique identities and political structures. The Zaporizhian Sich, located near the Dnieper River, became a major center for the Cossacks.

The Cossacks developed their own form of governance, characterized by a degree of direct democracy. They had a general assembly called a *rada*, where individual Cossacks had representation. At the head of their leadership were the *hetmans*. These Cossack centers, known as *sichs*, served as administrative, judicial, and military hubs.

The relationship between the Cossacks and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was often fraught. While they provided a defense against Tatar raids, the Cossacks also chafed under Polish control and policies. This tension exploded in the mid-17th century with the Khmelnytsky Uprising, a major revolt against Polish rule led by Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky.

The uprising led to the creation of a Cossack state, known as the Hetmanate, in

central Ukraine. This entity, also called the Zaporizhian Host, existed from 1649 to 1764, although its administrative system lasted a bit longer. The Hetmanate was a unique political formation, exhibiting elements of both a republic and a monarchy, with the Hetman at its head.

Bohdan Khmelnytsky, as the ruler of the Hetmanate, worked to build a state with its own military, administration, and economic system. He unified different segments of Ukrainian society under his authority. However, the Hetmanate's existence was precarious, caught between powerful neighbors. To protect their state, the Cossacks entered into agreements, notably the Pereiaslav Agreement of 1654, which brought them under the nominal protection of the Tsardom of Russia.

This relationship with Moscow proved to be a double-edged sword. While offering protection, it also led to a gradual erosion of the Hetmanate's autonomy. The political relationship was often renegotiated with each new Hetman, and Moscow steadily increased its influence. Internal divisions among the Cossack leadership and competing alliances further complicated the political landscape of the Hetmanate.

By the late 17th century, the Hetmanate was partitioned between Russia and Poland. The Left-Bank Ukraine, including Kyiv, came under Russian control, while the Right-Bank remained under Polish influence, at least for a time. This division marked a significant turning point, leading to different historical experiences for Ukrainians in these regions.

The Hetmanate on the Left-Bank, while enjoying a degree of self-government for a period, saw its autonomy progressively curtailed by the Russian Empire. The office of the Hetman was eventually abolished by Catherine the Great in 1764, and the territories were integrated into the Russian administrative system. Similarly, the Cossack presence in the Right-Bank was suppressed by Poland.

As the 18th century drew to a close, the lands that would become modern Ukraine were largely divided between the Russian and Habsburg (later Austro-Hungarian) empires. This period of foreign rule, which would last for over a century, profoundly shaped the political and social development of Ukrainians, setting the stage for future struggles for statehood and national identity.

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