

UKRAINIAN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND THE STUDY OF UKRAINE WITHIN AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE: HOW SIMILAR, HOW DIFFERENT?

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The objective of this essay is to compare key characteristics, pathways of development, and challenges facing the discipline of political science in the West (primarily in the US) and in Ukraine, to consider the causes of these differences, and to reflect on what it would take for political science in Ukraine to overcome the challenges it has faced in the post-Soviet period.

Political Science in Ukraine: Stability or Crisis?

There are not many published studies on the state of Ukrainian political science as a discipline, and those that exist differ in their conclusions. Among Ukrainian practitioners of political science who have written on the topic in recent years, there seems to be a consensus opinion that the discipline has reached a “period of stability,” having emerged out of the formative decade of the 1990s when the discipline had to be essentially developed from scratch in post-Soviet Ukraine (Rudych 2003b; Rudych 2003b; Matvienkiv 2008). This conclusion is supported by pointing to such facts as the establishment of the discipline within academic institutions and its formal recognition by the Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Education, definition of key research topics and methods of the discipline,¹ publication of many textbooks and monographs dedicated to political science, launching of political science periodicals, establishment of research institutes, professional associations, and the growing number of professional political scientists who were granted kandydat and doctor of political science degrees.

By contrast, assessment of Ukrainian political science by scholars based in the West, Western scholars working in Ukraine, and Ukrainian scholars more integrated into Western political science community is a lot less sanguine. In a scathing assessment of the state of the political science discipline in Ukraine one such scholar characterized Ukrainian political science as a “deeply provincial pseudo-science” that is “on a far periphery of world political science.” (Kudelia 2012). Responding to this assessment, another scholar, while taking issue with the broad juxtaposition of Ukrainian and Western political science as, respectfully, “bad” and “good”, agreed that in Ukraine during the last twenty years, “the quality of political science research has not reached either European or American levels {of quality}, and description of known realities has not transformed into their explanation” (Matsievskiy 2012).

The reasons for such criticisms of the state of the field of Ukrainian political science are several. First, the very conclusion that Ukrainian political science is on the periphery of world political science is not a subjective opinion but is based on the fact that very little Ukrainian political science output has received professional recognition on the basis of the global gold standard of scholarly quality – the peer-review process. There are no peer-reviewed political science journals in Ukraine (the lacunae the *Journal of Ukrainian Politics and Society* would be filling), and very few Ukrainian political scientists have published in peer-reviewed outlets in the West. Among nearly a thousand people who defended kandydat or doctoral dissertations in political science in Ukraine between 1991 and 2012, less than a handful have published single-authored monographs with a Western academic press, less than a dozen contributed to edited volumes, and around two dozen have published articles in peer-reviewed journals (Matsievskiy 2012). The peer-review process is demanding and lengthy, and because of this most Western political scientists do not have publication records of ten-plus books and hundred-plus articles. Such numbers, however, are not uncommon among senior and even mid-career political scientists in Ukraine and elsewhere in the former Soviet space. But quantity does not automatically equal quality, and seeing biographies with hundreds of publications is more likely to raise skeptical rather than admiring eyebrows Western colleagues.

In addition to the lack of peer-reviewed publications by Ukrainian political scientists - an objective marker of the weakness of Ukrainian political science - critics have identified additional problems with the discipline. Several in particular are worth highlighting. The first set of problems has to do with largely descriptive and non-comparative nature of most studies (Kudelia 2012). And while Masievskiy is right that “not all studies published in the West give new knowledge, and not all texts published in Ukraine are purely descriptive” (p. 10), the study of Ukraine by political science in Ukraine, unlike in the West (especially in North America), is not “puzzle-driven” (more on that below) and largely not comparative. Even though some Ukrainian political scientists acknowledge the importance of comparative work, such comparisons are for the most part descriptive rather than theoretically-driven. If, as will be discussed below, in Western political science comparative research generally seeks to critically assess and further advance social scientific causal theories, Ukrainian political scientists see the goals of comparative work quite differently – seemingly in documenting differences and similarities, and locating the “best” systems and models of development. Thus, Rudych states that comparative research “constitutes quantitative and qualitative juxtaposition of similar events and processes: government institutions, parties, electorates, with the goal of determining their common characteristics and specifics and of searching for the best forms of political organization and the most optimal ways of establishing social-political system” (Rudych 2003b).

The reasons behind non-comparative and descriptive nature of much of political science research in Ukraine are manifold - from lack of the tradition of critical thinking in social sciences in the Soviet period (when many of today's political scientists received their education in fields such as scientific communism, Marxist-Leninist philosophy, and history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) to,

perhaps understandably, focus on the travails of state-building in Ukraine in the post-Soviet period. As Kudelia notes, the lack of foreign language skills also limits Ukrainian political scientists to consuming either domestic or Russian scholarship, while Russian political science suffers from some of the same pitfalls – descriptive, non-comparative, atheoretical, and normatively oriented (Gel'man 2014).

This leads us to the second and related set of problems with Ukrainian political science – its atheoretical and often normative nature. In fact, what constitutes political science theory is understood quite differently in Ukraine and in the West. As will be discussed below, in Western context, theory is generally seen as instrument of knowledge that helps to think systematically about the realities of political life, and the validity and utility of political science theories is ascertained by systematically testing theories against empirical evidence. The “best” theory would be the one(s) which best withstands such an empirical test, not the one(s) that best support a particular normative ideal or ways to achieve it. By contrast, in political science theorizing in Ukraine, “personal beliefs often replace theoretically grounded conclusions, descriptive analysis (publitsystychnyi opys) is presented as analytical research, and clear scientific hypotheses are replaced by abstract claims and banal generalizations” (Kudelia 2012).

This lack of empirically-tested social scientific theorizing is also rooted in the Soviet past, in particular in the non-empirical nature of the disciplines from which post-Soviet political science arose. In the Soviet period, political science as a separate discipline did not exist, and the disciplines from which many of today's political scientists originated (philosophy, jurisprudence, logic) were not utilizing empirical research to test causal theories (Umland 2013). As a result, Umland states that, “on the one hand, in post-Soviet political science there accumulated a surplus of theoretical, philosophical, historical, definitional and conceptual discussions. On the other hand, there is a striking lack of primary empirical research.”

At a more general level, many Ukrainian political scientists fundamentally may not understand what contemporary political science is all about, what methods it uses, and what questions it asks (and does not) (Kudelia 2012; Umland 2013). Ukrainian (and more generally post-Soviet) political scientists, according to Umland, “have a tendency to see political science research as an intellectual, opinion-based, literary and/or interpretative exercise instead of an analytical-empirical and comparative one.” Similar problems plague political science textbooks published in Ukraine. According to Matsievsky, most published textbooks are characterized by “conceptual poverty” and “lack of a clear methodological base” (Matsievskyi 2004). Instead of showing how existing political realities can be analyzed through different theoretical lenses, the textbooks have “normative-descriptive approach” whereby “some 75%” of the content consists of “regurgitation of dry theory” and the remainder on explanations of realities in Ukraine (Matsievskyi 2004).

The normative bend characteristic of Ukrainian political science seems to be purposeful rather than accidental, since political scientists themselves – in contrast to their Western colleagues, as will be discussed below – see normative recommendations as one of the key goals of political science research. Thus,

authors of one textbook state that “political science has a normative-guiding function ... to answer the question ‘what’s better? What choice should be made?’” (Matsievskiy 2004). Another Ukrainian political scientist argues that “a key task of political science is its teaching-educational function, the formation of high political consciousness and political culture of citizens, especially among the younger generation” (Rudych 2003b).

The normative bend and fundamental misunderstanding of Western political science methods also affect the range of topics to which Ukrainian political scientists gravitate – and avoid. Many Ukrainian political scientists believe that “the social and political designation of a political scientist consists in the maximum support of the idea of statehood in general and one’s own statehood in particular” (Kholod 2001, p. 18). Dedication to support of statehood is in no way problematic as a personal political position, and also understandable in the environment of a new state, but it can cause problems when it comes to political science research. First, as Matsievskiy correctly points out, political science, as well as other social sciences, cannot and does not have a clear ideal or norm to which political system or political behavior must conform. If unconditional support for one’s statehood is a normative must, this can create a situation whereby political scientists can shy away from studying such phenomena as corruption and abuse of power by state leaders (Matsievskiy 2004). Another problem stemming from normatively oriented research agenda is identified by Umland who notes that there is a lacunae in the study of the far right in Ukraine (Umland 2013). Umland argues that it is caused by the patriotic orientation of many scholars: “historians and social scientists who consider themselves patriots are inclined to treat the cult of the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalist) {cultivated in} the Halytchyna and in the Ukrainian diaspora with understanding or even sympathy,” and to see “extremist ethno-nationalist tendencies existing in Ukraine as, perhaps excessive, but at the same time at least partly understandable, safe, or even desirable manifestations of Ukrainian national identity and pride.” As a result, scholars come to see “criticism of Ukrainian nationalism – even of its most extreme manifestations - as corresponding to the ideology not of the European but of the Soviet Union, and being an expression of not Western but Russian preferences” (Umland 2013).

American Political Science and its Study of Ukraine

So how does the state of affairs of Ukrainian political science described above compare with the state of affairs in Western political science, in particular Western political science that studies Ukraine? As mentioned at the start, by Western political science this essay primarily speaks of American political science. Focus on the US can be justified by the fact that Western political science is rather unipolar, with about 80% of political science researchers and instructors in the world working in universities and institutions located in the United States (Sartori 2004, p. 794). Yet this is not to say that non-US political science does not deserve attention, or that without such attention this analysis is admittedly incomplete. I would recommend that readers interested in the development of political science

in continental Europe consult other sources, for example (Kinnvall 2005). Within the discipline of American political science the study of Ukraine falls primarily to the sub-field of comparative politics, the defining features of this subfield make the most relevant comparison with the field of political science in Ukraine.

The key problems of Ukrainian political science, as discussed above, are that most of the works tend to be normative, descriptive, atheoretical, and non-comparative. American political science has not been immune to the very same problems. In fact, one can say that these very problems characterized much of American political science from its inception in the second half of the 19th century through the inter-war period, and it is only in the post-WWII era when American political science and the comparative politics subfield became more value-neutral and embraced theory-driven comparative empirical inquiry.

Consider what the discipline looked like in the early decades of its existence. As Blyth notes, in the late 19th and early 20th century before WWI, political scientists took “inspiration from the Prussian state as the model of good governance and proper public administration,” and “sought to draw general lessons from this single case in order to develop better models of governance.” (Blyth 2006, p. 493). The focus on formal state institutions and the search of the best model of governance made the discipline descriptive and normative. As Dryzek observed, “From Francis Lieber, appointed to the first American professorship in history and political science at Columbia in 1857, to Woodrow Wilson and well beyond, the main practical task of political science was seen as the establishment of a unitary national state accompanied by a virtuous national citizenry” (Dryzek 2006, p. 487) – the goal very similar to what some Ukrainian political scientists set for themselves today, as discussed above. If, in its first decades, American political science was both descriptive and normative, concerned with advocacy for the best institutions, in the inter-war period American political science became “the study of irrelevance” (Blyth 2006, p. 493). It retained the state-centric focus and attention to descriptive analysis of formal institutions, but failed to predict any of the cataclysmic events of the period such as the fall of great powers, the rise of fascism and communism, and world wars – and even to study these major events of the time (Blyth 2006).

It was in the post-WWII period when the discipline underwent fundamental changes. Even though different time periods of the past seven decades can be associated with the dominance of a particular methodological approach (behavioralism, state-theory, new institutionalism, rational choice, etc.), and adherents of these approaches at times have engaged in heated debates with each other, the overall goal of the discipline has become to explain causes of important political phenomena and variations in this phenomena across countries and regions of the world. What would it take for new post-colonial states to democratize? For underdeveloped countries to develop? Why some states managed to establish and maintain democratic forms of government while democracy in others fell to military coups and authoritarianism? Why ethnic conflicts rage in some ethnically diverse societies but not in others? These are the types of questions the field of comparative politics has been seeking to answer, and this “focus on consequential political outcomes – justice, representation, order, democracy” is what distinguishes

political science as a discipline these days (Laitin 2004, p. 790). And even when proponents of different methods have disagreed on what constituted best causal explanations, they have generally remained united on the kinds of questions the discipline should be asking and how it should go about answering them – by systematically collecting and analyzing empirical data, and letting such analysis rather than one’s normative persuasions become the basis on which the validity of alternative theories is judged.

Disciplinary consensus around these fundamental principles of political science disciplines is evident in what has become known as the Perestroika debate that has been raging in American political science since the early 2000s. The Perestroika movement has argued against the dominance of formal methods of rational choice theory, game theory, and statistical analysis and marginalization of qualitative research and area studies. At the same time, key scholars associated with the movement such as Larry Diamond fully agree that “good work in political science cannot be merely descriptive or exclusively country-focused. ... To really know a country or region well, to do good work in area studies, one must know the relevant theories of comparative political development or governance, and one must have a concern either to examine those theories in the light of the country experience, or to extend or reformulate theory from country or cross-country experience or, ideally, both. Otherwise, we really are only doing history, and not very good history at that” (Diamond 2002, p. 4-5).

To recap, in the words of Keohane, political science has become “the study of politics through the procedures of science” (Keohane 2009, p. 359), with science understood not in a narrow sense (“requiring mathematical formulations of its propositions, precise quantitative testing, or even experimental validation”) but in a broader sense as “publicly known sets of procedures designed to make and evaluate descriptive causal inferences on the basis of self-conscious application of methods that are themselves subject to public evaluation” (Keohane 2009, p. 359).

When specifying key defining features of contemporary political science, in particular of its comparative politics subfield, puzzle-driven research needs to be mentioned. Puzzle-driven research is a central element in political science inquiry, including the study of Ukraine within comparative politics. What is a puzzle and why it is an important ingredient of high quality political science output? As Keohane explains, when we observe something that “does not fit with our preconceptions based on established theory,” we have identified a puzzle. “Great leaps forward in political science,” Keohane continues, “often take place when someone sees puzzles, when others have only seen facts.” (Keohane 2009, p. 360). In other words, instead of researching how democracy works in a particular country, a better question would be to puzzle over why among countries similar on several dimensions (say, economic development, geopolitical position, ethnic homogeneity etc.) some managed to establish functioning democracies while others did not. Identifying true puzzles requires knowledge of both empirical realities and existing theories. It also requires constant critical thinking about existing theories, including the most established ones. American political science welcomes this and teaches graduate students to think along those lines. As Keohane put it in this lecture to

graduate students, “none of our sacred cows is immune to criticism!” (Keohane 2009, p. 362). This culture of critical thinking was entirely absent in social sciences in the Soviet period, and is still sorely lacking in Ukrainian political science.

Yet another feature that sets Western and especially American political science apart from the state of the discipline in Ukraine is the role of teaching. Even though the professional reputation of political science in the West is built principally on written work, virtually all top-ranked Western political scientists are in teaching positions at colleges and universities rather than spending their careers at research institutes and think tanks (Keohane 2009, p. 360). By contrast, in Ukraine many, if not most, publishing political scientists are based in research institutes and think tanks.² How can this difference impact the quality of the work produced?

Responding to Kudelia’s point that Ukrainian political science is for the most part descriptive and normative, Matsievkiy advocates distinguishing between “academic (university) research and expert (analytical) research.” The latter is conducted in think tanks and research institutes and, according to Matsievkiy, is primarily empirical – and thus presumably unfairly criticized by Kudelia (Matsievkiy 2012). However, the distinction between academic and applied political science is not uniformly accepted as valid. Some Western scholars have indeed been critical of American-style political science for its perceived failure to develop the applied branch that would “confront the theory-practice relationship” (Sartori 2004, p. 786). On this view, there is a distinction between theoretical and applied political science, and the failings of one branch do not mean another branch is plagued by the same problems, as Matsievkiy argues. However, other Western political scientists have disagreed with Sartori’s position. In a rejoinder to Sartori, Colomer argues that comparing political science with economics and criticizing the latter for not developing an applied branch like the former is misguided because the effective applied branch of any science or social science discipline can develop only after the discipline has achieved a high level of theoretical consistency, usually following long trajectory of cumulative knowledge, as economics (a discipline older than political science) did before applied economics developed in the last two or three decades (Colomer 2004, p. 793). In this case then, applied research without theoretical research “is neither science nor a contribution to cumulative knowledge or intellectual, material, or moral progress of human beings. Atheoretical applied teaching can transmit, at most, certain tools and skills based on practitioners’ experience (in business or in electoral campaigns or in whatever else)” (Colomer 2004, p. 793). Going back to Ukraine, the weak state of academic and theoretical political science would be a hindrance to the development of quality applied political science, and the latter would be able to develop only after the former is firmly established as a unified discipline with high level of theoretical consistency.

Finally, the fact that, unlike their Western counterparts, many Ukrainian political scientists are not active teachers may also hinder the development of the discipline. Keohane argues that it is not accidental that virtually all top-ranked Western political scientists are in active teaching positions. Teaching undergraduates compels one to be able to put social science arguments into ordinary language, which in turn helps to see weaknesses of theoretical arguments such as lack of clarity, redundancy,

circular reasoning and others. Teaching also exposes political scientists to new ideas from “younger and more supple minds – as long as the students are sufficiently critical of the professor’s views.” (Keohane 2009, p. 360). So the fact that few political scientists in Ukraine are in active teaching positions, along with the lack of the classroom culture of critical thinking and fear or challenging authority, may be contributing to identified problems with the discipline.

What are the Lessons and Possible Ways Forward for Political Science in Ukraine?

So what can be done to bring Ukrainian political science from the periphery into the global disciplinary mainstream? This essay has not set out to provide recommendations for reforming the discipline in Ukraine but rather to compare the state of affairs of political science in Ukraine and in the West, primarily in America. The task of reforming the discipline, starting with taking the very decision that reforms are indeed needed, is something that Ukrainian political scientists will need to consider. Comparative analysis in the essay however raises some questions Ukrainian colleagues may want to think about.

One such question is how scholars’ personal political beliefs and ideologies (be they patriotic or, say, of a pro-Russian orientation) affect the quality of political science research and the discipline at large. As a relatively new state, and especially a state currently facing an aggressive irredentist Russian neighbor, the situation Ukrainian political scientists find themselves in now is not directly comparable to the situation of colleagues in Western states. However, it is not that dissimilar from American political science in the late 19th and early 20th century when American political science as a discipline was founded not to dispassionately study politics but, as discussed above, to advance a political agenda, namely the realization of “state will”, understood as creation of a unitary nation state with virtuous citizenry. In pursuit of this goal, scholars studies tried to expose “corruption, patronage, party machines, parochialism, and regionalism” of American institutions (Dryzek 2006, p. 487-488).

Ideologically-motivated choice of topics and the presence of normative ideal and educational objectives towards the society and its citizenry of early American political science closely echo contemporary criticisms of Ukrainian political science discussed in this essay, such as avoidance of certain topics (far right, government corruption, etc.) and the perceived need to further patriotism and political consciousness of the citizens. Ukrainian political scientists thus might decide that if their American colleagues went through this stage without harming the discipline, why cannot they as well. The problem is, however, that when American political science was going through this phase of normatively-driven research, global political science essentially did not exist and, thus, American political scientists were not outliers of the disciplinary mainstream. In fact, whatever they did was the mainstream. Today, however, to defend normatively-oriented research would relegate Ukrainian political science to the periphery of the global community of political science scholarship, since in its methods and approaches the discipline

moved far away from where American political science was at the turn of the 20th century. With simultaneous pursuit of patriotism and social science problematics, Ukrainian political scientists need to think about which one they want to prioritize and be cognizant of the consequences of this choice.

One final question to end this essay: are the fates of Ukrainian democracy and Ukrainian political science related? In other words, can Ukrainian political science flourish and successfully compete on the global arena if democracy fails to consolidate in Ukraine in the post-Maidan era? It is true that some important theoretical advances in political science have emerged in non-democratic settings (transitology theory, for example, originated in Latin America, but there authoritarianism was punctuated by periods of greater pluralism). However, the bulk of high quality contemporary political science output is produced overwhelmingly in Western democracies, which raises the question: if the success of one is dependent on the success of the other? Some political scientists argue explicitly that this is the case. If political scientists do their job, Keohane argues, they will be “irritating to political leaders, since we illuminate their deliberate obscurities and deceptions, we point to alternative policies that could be followed, we question their motivations and dissect the operations of organizations that support them and governments over which they preside. They will try to buy us off or, failing that, if not prevented from doing so, shut us up. As a result, we have a symbiotic relationship with democracy. We can only thrive when democracy flourishes, and democracy – in a smaller way – needs us, if only as a small voice of dispassionate reason” (Keohane 2009, p. 363). Perhaps Ukrainian political scientists can move the discipline along by helping advance democracy in Ukraine through their commitment to democratic pluralism when it comes to topics and questions they pursue, and by striving for objectivity in seeking answers to these questions. The goal of objectivity can never be fully realized, Keohane reminds us, but we should strive for it nevertheless “because otherwise people with other preferences, or who do not know what our values are, will have no reason to take our findings seriously.” (Keohane 2009, p. 363).

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Notes

¹ Rudych notes in this regard that there has been a debated in Ukraine whether political science should be a separate discipline or, because it studies questions also addressed by other social sciences, political science was essentially political sociology rather than a distinct discipline. Rudych also notes that discussion took place over whether “scientific nationalism” should form the basis of Ukrainian political science, and whether Ukrainian political science should be conceived as a discipline specific to Ukraine (since in every country the study of politics is tied to national specifics). According to Rudych, the outcome of these discussions was to reject the idea that nationalism needs to be a theoretical and practical foundation of state-building in Ukraine, and also to reject the conceptualization of political science in Ukraine as a Ukraine-specific discipline. Instead, a “Ukrainian political science school” needs to be created that would contribute theories and other intellectual products that would be distinct from what other schools have to offer and thus would be the forte of

Ukrainian political science (Rudych 2003b).

² In Ukraine there are 47 recognized think-tanks, which place Ukraine 25th in the world and 3rd in Eastern Europe (Matsievskiy 2012).

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