CONFERENCE REPORT

"Political Development between Competing Empires: Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia in Search of Sustainable Political and Economic Orders"

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- The region comprising Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus remains a space "in between" in many ways. Ideologically, these countries struggle to find new visions and identities and therefore remain bound together by their Soviet and post-Soviet legacies. Both politically and economically the three countries are specific mixtures of post-Soviet and Western elements, while they are linked by their current economic problems.

- The combination of weak formal institutions and powerful oligarchic networks remains a central barrier to further reform. Oligarchy is an already entrenched phenomenon in the region and oligarchs have adjusted to societal challenges with sophisticated wealth-securing strategies. However, weak political institutions and rising inequality have also been a source for the generation of successful protest and therefore a considerable political dynamic, esp. in Ukraine and Georgia.

- The space "between the empires" has been and remains a space for socio-political experiments. The hybrid regimes and systems observable here are the result of elite-driven cycles of modernization and de-modernization, which to date have not resulted in a clear break with the more rigid Soviet experiments. On the other hand, civil society and external actors such as the European Union (EU) are increasingly promoting Western-style institutions, while consistency of approach and time are of utmost importance in supporting change.

- The relationship between the EU and the countries of the region becomes increasingly complicated by the fact that perceptions about what the Union stands for diverge inside and outside of the EU. The lack of an integration prospect and uncertainty about the Union's vision are perpetuating the "in between"-status of countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, whose governments are committed to Western integration. The publics of the region in particular are therefore growing more skeptical about integration as a choice between one "empire" over the other and want to maintain good relations with both the EU and Russia.

- The EU's conditionality instruments such as the Association Agreements and corresponding DCFTA's have an impact beyond the economic sphere and have significantly influenced private sector development as well as governance modes in Ukraine and Georgia. For sustained progress and change an intense and efficient cooperation of governmental bodies, reform-oriented civil society and a long-term committed EU is necessary. The EU – in an environment devoid of planning capacities – particularly needs to provide vision and concrete plans outlining how to take advantage of its support.

- Visa-free travel for the people of Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus is a still underestimated instrument for supporting change in the region. By allowing citizens of post-Soviet countries to experience first hand how institutions function differently in the West, they will understand the potential their countries have if reforms are ultimately implemented and successful.

1.   Introduction

Since 2014 and the events following the "Revolution of Dignity" in Ukraine, the still so-called post-Soviet region has taken yet another step towards greater diversity in regime characteristics as well as geopolitical orientations. While post-revolutionary Ukraine and a more democratically consolidated Georgia are trying hard to integrate with the West, turmoil-ridden Moldova and Armenia are struggling to find working models and direction, and even Belarus and some Central Asian states – despite the persistence of autocratic rule – are eager to strike a new balance by reducing Russian influence. Clearly, however, most states of the region confront a new quality of domestically and internationally-induced stress for the foreseeable future: whereas the prolonged and structurally–based economic recession of the whole region is questioning the existing political and economic orders with a growing potential for social unrest, Russia's military answer to Ukraine's revolution and the EU's foreign policy-"catharsis" challenge statehood and make security a priority.

Those observations are a challenge also to existing approaches in the study of political transformation and democratization. Whilst it has been accepted now that the once popular "linear" or "convergence model" of transformation cannot explain the many democratic roll-backs and hybrid or even autocratic regime types in many third and fourth wave democratization contexts, there is still a considerable lack in explanations of what drives political and economic development and how new "equilibria models" could look like.

The conference and this report seek to assess how the "transitional" space between the modern West and the collapsed Soviet Union looks like today. Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Belarus and Armenia not only find themselves between Soviet and Western systems, but also between competing regional projects: the European Union (EU) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) led by Russia. The pressure to join one of these economic blocs has only grown in light of the global financial crisis and Russian military action against Ukraine. By examining theoretical frameworks, hard data and field study observations presented at the conference, the aim of this report is to provide a more realistic picture of the political and economic characteristics of these countries "in transition", of the changes underway in the region and of what is driving those changes.

2.   Conceptually Describing the Space Between Empires

Twenty-five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union the defining feature of the space between the EU and Russia is still that it was formerly part of the Soviet Union, or that it is "post-Soviet." That reality indicates a failure of these countries to each find new ideologies or political systems, and to instead to continue to be bound together by problems arising from having Soviet legacy-state

structures. The failure of something new to emerge has kept these countries in transition as they remain between their Soviet past and a modern Western future. With EU and NATO membership elusive for these countries, however, their foreseeable future will be determined by their own mixtures of modern Western institutions and adaptations of Soviet structures.

> *"Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Belarus and Armenia have been governed since the collapse of the Soviet Union without a clear ideology or vision for the future."*

A consistent problem for leaders in the region is defining what sort of a future they are aiming to achieve for their countries. Defining a vision of the future has become exceedingly difficult because of the complete collapse of ideology after the fall of the Soviet Union. Though Soviet results often fantastically failed to live up to plans, the Soviet Union had an unwavering ideologically driven vision of a radiant future promising eventual material prosperity. The collapse of the Soviet Union and impoverishment of its former citizens that followed, exposed the deception of that promise and made it impossible to convince the majority of post-Soviet citizens of a similar plan for the future, resulting in the discrediting of all -isms.

As a result Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Belarus and Armenia have been governed since the collapse of the Soviet Union without a clear ideology or vision for the future. Pro-Western governments in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have been oriented towards the EU, but beyond pursuing EU membership have no clearly articulated vision of their future. Authoritarian Belarus draws more heavily from the Soviet past to justify the rule of President Alexander Lukashenko, but no longer has a proletarian vision of a prosperous future.

Because of this leaders have struggled to define what their states stand for. In Ukraine the first two post-Soviet presidencies were defined by either fake ideology or a complete lack of ideology as typified by President Leonid Kuchma's statement that "Ukraine is not Russia", which while asserting distinction failed to articulate a vision of what Ukraine actually is. After the Orange Revolution President Viktor Yushchenko attempted to create a new national ideology, but he failed to gain widespread support for that vision before the process ended with Viktor Yanukovych being elected president. The "Revolution of Dignity", however, with its focus on ideas rooted in Western values such as human rights, goes beyond simply joining the EU and has since become the basis for a new ideology in development that gives answers to the question of what Ukraine is, and potentially for what the region is as well (*André Härtel*). By defining the Ukrainian identity and the Ukrainian state by adherence to rights and freedoms it creates a positive answer to the question what the

country stands for that breaks with both the Soviet Union and Russia.

A previous lack of a positive answer to that question has left these countries in a transition limbo. As decades have passed "transition" has not been the status countries in the region have moved through, but rather the permanent space they exist in.

Georgia has made the most consistent strides towards the West, but even contemporary Georgian society is stuck in a never-ending transition characterized by ambiguity conceptualized as "liminality" with no near-term prospect of joining the EU or NATO. To further the goal of joining these organizations Georgia's political elite has consistently promoted historical and cultural arguments for why Georgians are Europeans and therefore should be a member of these organizations, but the limits of these projects are shown by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Georgians still sees themselves as Georgian rather than as Georgian and European (*Shota Kakabadze*).

As a result prior to the "Revolution of Dignity" projects that "move" these countries in one direction or another have mainly been projects of elites. Georgia is a useful example because among the Western-oriented post-Soviet states outside of the EU it has experienced the longest periods of reform and of pro-Western governments. Though successive governments since the "Rose Revolution" have kept the same foreign policy priorities, Georgia shows the limitations of even consistent pro-Western political orientation to change post-Soviet societies.

"Although conventional wisdom and often foreign policy realities present integration as a choice of one 'empire' over the other, there is an eagerness on the part of the broader public to maintain relations with both."

There are three main dimensions of overlap in regional integration: political, policy and societal. Though political elites often present regional integration projects as being dichotomous, the general public often supports overlapping regional integration projects. Georgia is considered one of the most strongly pro-Western nations in the post-Soviet world, but recent survey data shows a large portion of the Georgian population supports closer ties with Russia and with the European Union at the same time and there are also similar results from Ukraine and Belarus (*Aron Buzogány*).

That information shows that although conventional wisdom and often foreign policy realities present integration as a choice of one "empire" over the other, there is an eagerness on the part of the broader public to maintain relations with both. Though in cases like Ukraine where Russia chose to force Ukraine to choose between either Russia or the EU, it shows that the wider public does not necessarily see themselves as moving "away" from post-Soviet neighbors, but developing new connections while still keeping open all

opportunities for growth and development in cooperation with other post-Soviet states.

In post-Soviet countries with a stated goal of transitioning, the EU takes on a special meaning, becoming a symbol for what they wish to achieve on a wider scale rather than simply being perceived as a trade bloc and supranational body. The difference, however, can make the EU take on a different meaning in transitional countries in comparison to current members, especially at a time when euroscepticism is growing within the borders of the EU.

The EU is a "post-political power" driven by ideas seen as "inherent necessities" that are applied to countries outside of the EU, and the Union provides structures for importing and applying those ideas, which are considered to be an intrinsic part of Europeanness. In the case of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova this happens through the framework of the Association Agreement. But despite this focus on ideas there is the potential for miscommunication since those ideas can be understood differently in these countries and the EU. In Ukraine the EU has become a symbol of Ukraine's European aspirations and commitment to reform and progress, but increasingly within the EU itself many countries see the Union as a barrier to reform and progress rather than a facilitator (*Johann Zajaczkowski*). As a result pro-Western post-Soviet countries are "moving" towards the EU at a time when there is great uncertainty within the EU about what it stands for.

Because of the uncertainties and the limits of closer connection with the EU for even the most enthusiastic post-Soviet states, the region will continue to be defined by being geographically "in between" the EU and Russia, and systematically between modern Western and Soviet political and economic models. At the same time the "Revolution of Dignity" in Ukraine has begun the process of positively defining the region, beginning the process of reviving belief in common values and ideology.

3. Political and Economic Realities in the Space between Empires

At the present countries in the region continue to be defined by being a mixture of the Soviet Union's rigid institutions and the bigger political and economic freedom of the West. With institutions poorly entrenched, each country represents a separate mixture of these elements, defining the region by its mixed systems with the exact mixture dependent on influential political figures and their economic links, rather than on political parties and their publicly presented ideologies.

In the economic sphere, the diversity of systems has made it more difficult to compare these post-Soviet economies with others. In the past comparison simply meant comparing market capitalism with Soviet planned economies, but now different post-Soviet states represent different models between a planned economy and a market economy (*Aliaksei Zhurauliou*). Belarus is still a largely state-controlled economy and has preserved much of its Soviet industry, but is highly dependent on Russia, and its goods

are not very competitive. Ukraine has a more flexible economy that has connections to both the EU and Russia, but is plagued by its oligarchic structure and a large shadow economy. Georgia represents a smaller economy that has had to restructure because of Russian aggression, breaking with the traditional trade model. All three countries are plagued by high inflation, trade imbalances and debt.

As a result countries are more linked by their common economic problems than by their exact economic systems. The 2008 financial crisis decimated attempts at "third way" economic systems, forcing countries to focus on established economic models. This has placed pressure on post-Soviet states to again move towards freer Western-style models and limit state control, but the common economic challenges limit the speed and political viability of that economic change.

A major challenge to such reforms in many post-Soviet countries is the influence of oligarchs, who took over Soviet industrial assets and have used their wealth to influence politics in order to protect themselves and secure new monopolies. That influence goes beyond the economic sphere and also places limits on politics and broader reforms.

"The fact that oligarchs have different origins of their wealth and have subsequently opted for different strategies of wealth defense means that they are not necessarily all threatened by the same reforms."

Ukraine's oligarchs made their fortunes in the nineties mainly through privatization, trade and re-export of natural resources. As a result of privileged access to resources and decision-making, some 20 oligarchs came to control almost a quarter of Ukraine's GDP – a phenomenon which is known as "captured state". Yet, oligarchs in Ukraine are not a uniform collective actor. They developed different strategies for defending their assets in the face of challenges like the Orange Revolution, Viktor Yanukovych's presidency and current post-Maidan Ukraine (*Iryna Solonenko*). Four case studies related to four oligarchs that were presented (Rinat Akhmetov, Ihor Kolomoisky, Viktor Pinchuk and Yuriy Kosiuk) show this. Akhmetov is strongly embedded in eastern Ukraine and has stood firmly behind specific political projects like the "Party of the Regions" and its successor "Opposition Bloc", allowing him to exert significant influence over politics and hinder some reforms. Kolomoisky owns important assets of the country's economy (such as a major airliner) making it extremely difficult to cut off the source of his financial power; meanwhile he backs different political projects giving him diverse sources of political leverage, while taking advantage of political opportunities – as he did when he became governor of Dnipropetrovsk region in 2014. Pinchuk has focused on international legitimization, showing that through his philanthrophy and international activities he

has a net positive effect on Ukraine. Kosiuk has shifted to international markets to reduce his business' reliance on the political situation in Ukraine.

The fact that oligarchs have different origins of their wealth and have subsequently opted for different strategies of wealth defense means that they are not necessarily all threatened by the same reforms and are differently linked to politics, making their influence dispersed or even contradictory. Nonetheless, the weakness of post-Soviet states' institutions makes money play a larger role in politics than in Western countries, increasing oligarchs influence on politics.

Ukraine is again a key example because of its powerful oligarchs and weak political system. Ukraine's political system is the least institutionalized in Europe because of parties' and elites' refusal to maintain and adhere to election laws or consistent ideologies (*Kostiantyn Fedorenko*). This flexibility comes from an overall weakness of ideology; the role of political parties as vehicles for personalities; and the dependence of party interests on the changing objects of financial backers. In Ukraine, election rules are often changed and rarely adhered to, creating an unpredictable playing field. Parties consistently emerge and disappear in Ukraine (resembling Russia before 2003). Money spent on campaigns generally corresponds to election results, further destabilizing the system. Recently there have been increasing signs of stabilization, but if the Donbas is re-integrated it risks destabilizing the system

again. The weak structures also create ambiguity that can be taken advantage of for political gain via corruption, further increasing the influence of oligarchs who can be expected by parties to provide the necessary funds.

These political realities have created tension in post-Soviet states between democratic aspirations and state capture by oligarchs. Greater economic and political freedom in countries like Ukraine allowed an oligarchic elite to emerge in contrast to Belarus, where the economy has remained largely state-controlled. The situation in countries like Ukraine created a political system that was formally democratic but failed to represent the interests of the people. The conflict came to a head during the "Revolution of Dignity" in Ukraine.

"The same weak political structures in the region that allowed oligarchs to maximize their influence have also weakened the position of government leaders, creating the potential for accountability once a critical mass of public outrage and involvement is reached."

Oligarchs in Ukraine were dependent on metallurgical, chemical and transport industries. These industries are dependent on cheap energy provided by Russia. The Ukrainian government focused on serving

these interests. As a result Ukraine's government backed out of the Association Agreement with the EU that would have damaged these industries dependent on Russia. But the government failed to build a public consensus on this change, sparking protests and leading to its eventual fall (*Zuzana Novakova*).

The fall of the Yanukovych government showed the limits of oligarchic and elite influence over post-Soviet states. Where in Russia a similar turn of events under Putin has been unimaginable, the same weak political structures in the region that allowed oligarchs to maximize their influence have also weakened the position of government leaders, creating the potential for accountability once a critical mass of public outrage and involvement is reached.

As a result, the mixed political and economic systems in the region both create inequality that drives calls for reform and change, and a situation where public outrage is able to facilitate political change if momentum is gathered. That potential for change has been demonstrated by the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution and Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine (among comparable events in other countries).

4. The Space between Empires as a Place for Experiments

The former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus have long been a center of social experiments. Their position bordering foreign countries in the Soviet Union made them laboratories of change, often to negative results, meant to showcase and promote perceived achievements of the Soviet Union to the outside world. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the necessity of change has again turned these areas into centers of experimentation as they seek to find ways to create greater political and economy stability.

These two generations of social-political experiments can be compared because they both resulted in hybrid institutions and cycles of modernization and de-modernization (*Mykhailo Minakov*). Social experiments are a type of social engineering meant to form a system to get best results. A social-political experiment is a radical case of social engineering aimed at implementing utopian values. It is an attempt to control norms by changing popular norms, values and practices. The Soviet experiment was intended to enact utopian-revolutionary theories, but the post-Soviet experiments were intended to build a "normal" society by returning to Europe and creating Western economies and states. Both projects were supported by elites at the time because they believed they would legitimate their rule, and both experiments resulted in hybrid institutions with cycles of modernization and de-modernization.

The desire to achieve a more effective society continues to drive experimentation in the region. Because of the rigidity of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet states continue to struggle to break with Soviet bureaucratic traditions and develop institutions that will allow them to more quickly adopt new

technology and change. That process means that countries in the region are not only between the EU and Russia, but between a Western technological modernity and Soviet technological backwardness.

One of the key platforms for innovation has been social media, which drove the protests in Ukraine during the "Revolution of Dignity" and other protests around the world, including the Arab Spring. Belarus has generally preserved a Soviet suspicion of change and new technology, but that has not stopped individual Belarusians from trying to adopt technology to push societal change with Western digital platforms, such as Facebook, providing new opportunities for the marginalized opposition and civil society (*Aliaksei Herasimenka*). Traditional media is still tightly controlled in Belarus and mainstream officials rarely use social media, allowing opposition figures to use Western social media to invigorate civil society and reach a wider segment of the population. The 2011 "Silent Protests" were a Belarusian response to the Arab Spring when social media was used by protestors to organize on an unprecedented scale. It showed that social media has become a way for non-governmental actors and organizations, especially with a pro-Western orientation, to reach their audience.

The region, however, is not only seen as a center for experimentation by the people who live there. For the EU the region also continues to be an area of interest in how to develop civil society, accountability and good governance.

As part of this aim, in both Belarus and Ukraine the EU is attempting to develop "depressed" small cities by increasing the capacity for self-government, but is limited by underdeveloped civil society and restricted local autonomy (*Dorit Happ*). Via the European Neighborhood Policy, the EU seeks to share its stability, security and prosperity with other countries and prevent the emergence of new dividing lines in Europe. Part of that policy is the development of the regions to combat their exclusion and peripheralisation. One of the main priorities is to increase the capacity of self-government so that more decisions can be made on the local level using local knowledge.

> *"Simply transplanting institutions or expecting the exact same Western ideas to work as well in post-Soviet states as in the West has consistently shown its limitations, making the process of implementing them crucial."*

These projects have focused on "depressed" cities that are dominated by one industry and have been hurt by the general decline of it. In Belarus state oversight is stricter, but in both countries there is a lack of developed civil society and active involvement in government actions, limiting development opportunities. Nonetheless in Ukraine, de-centralization and the passing of responsibility and funds to the local level has

the potential to increase local accountability and decision-making. This transformation is part of turning a Soviet centralized society into a modern society with active civil participation and decision-making at the local level.

At the core of these experiments is the question of what actually helps Western-style institutions to take root in post-Soviet states. Simply transplanting institutions or expecting the exact same Western ideas to work as well in post-Soviet states as in the West has consistently shown its limitations, making the process of implementing them crucial.

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are all hybrid regimes that have reform-oriented governments, hold free and fair elections and have records of implementing reforms. Nonetheless these three countries have divergent results concerning reform, and specifically reducing the role of informal networks. Corruption thrives on informal networks, making reducing informal networks an instrumental part of the fight against corruption. Consistent reforms applied over an extended period of time is key for reducing informal networks, making Georgia, where reforms have not been interrupted, more successful at reducing informal networks and corruption than Moldova and Ukraine, where reforms have been interrupted and not pursued for as long a period of time (*Huseyn Aliyev*). These results show that when it comes to experiments delivering change via reforms, consistency of approach and time are the key factors.

A more focused experiment in change in the region is the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which is part of the Association Agreement (AA) between the EU and Ukraine, and Georgia. It requires Ukraine and Georgia to adopt EU standards for goods and allows the progressive removal of customs tariffs. The DCFTA has tremendous potential to change the economies of Ukraine and Georgia, making them more Western and giving them access to the largest market in the world, but requires the outright adoption of EU norms.

The effects of the DCFTA, however, go beyond the economic sphere. The adoption of the DCFTA allowed the EU to significantly broaden and deepen the scope of legal and accompanying instruments that it uses to promote private sector development in Ukraine and Georgia. The instruments range from elaborate "market access"-conditionality to large-scale technical assistance programs. Private sector development measures take different forms, ranging from the facilitation of the regulatory changes to the improvement of access to finance and awareness campaigns. The example of deregulation in Ukraine testifies to the fact that even "vague" obligations, stipulated by the Association Agenda, can result in specific achievements, provided the cooperation of the governmental bodies and reform-oriented civil society organizations. The DCFTA's benefits thus go beyond free trade and make the private sector in Ukraine and Georgia more attractive for investment (*Maryna Rabinovych*).

The EU has played a large role in changing the internal procedures and even civil society conversations in post-Soviet states. That has been particularly noticeable in the NGO sphere, where funding from and training in the EU, US and other Western countries has made discussions of key civil society issues more similar to discussions in the West.

"The opportunity to travel to Western countries, in particular the EU, allows citizens of post-Soviet countries to experience first hand how institutions function differently in the West and the potential they have at home if reformed."

In 2012 news broke that Georgia's government under then President Mikheil Saakashvili had made 23,000 illegal recordings of private telephone conversations. The events connected Georgia with a global discussion about government spying following Edward Snowden's revelations that the United States had undertaken an unprecedented international spying program. Previously in Georgia, personal privacy had not been as high of a priority as in Western countries. In response to the recording in Georgia, however, NGOs in Georgia led a campaign against government spying. This movement brought civil society developments in Georgia closer to developments in Western countries. Much of Georgian civil society is funded by Western governments and NGOs, and relies primarily on Western educated staff, encouraging norm convergence as those organizations and individuals apply Western civil society priorities to local debates (*Dennis Redeker*).

Western countries continue to use soft power to reshape post-Soviet civil society, but freedom of movement is also increasingly seen as a powerful tool to change post-Soviet societies. The opportunity to travel to Western countries, in particular the EU, allows citizens of post-Soviet countries to experience first hand how institutions function differently in the West and the potential they have at home if reformed. In this regard EU visa free travel plans for Ukrainian and Georgian citizens have tremendous potential to change Ukrainian and Georgian societies once traveling to the West becomes more accessible. These changes also have the potential to set Ukraine and Georgia on a path of divergence from their post-Soviet neighbors.

Neighbors Georgia and Armenia for example have similar populations, GDPs and high unemployment levels. They are both heavily reliant on their citizens going to work abroad and the remittances they send back. The European Neighborhood Policy has sought to make travel to the EU easier for Georgians and Armenians, but it is still easier and cheaper to travel to other post-Soviet states. In recent years the European Union and Russia have been increasingly in conflict,

with Russia seeing the Association Agreements as a threat to its interests. Russia as a result pushed its own economic union, which Armenia was pressured into joining, pulling out of signing the Association Agreement with the EU. Georgia to the contrary signed its Association Agreement. Thus the two countries are proceeding on paths that would diverge their migration futures though the present realities remain similar (*Natia Mechitishvili*).

But while the EU and the West provide the potential for change, and change is expected by leaders pursuing closer association with the EU, it is not possible without support and a vision outlining how to take advantage of it and direct it. In cash-strapped post-Soviet countries, and especially Ukraine, that planning has often been lacking.

In pursuing a closer relationship with the EU with the end goal of membership, Ukraine has undergone increasing Europeanization. Europeanization is distinct from Westernization and modernization, and is the process of assimilation to European political practices, rules, and standards and values (*Darina Dvornichenko*). The Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU removes trade restrictions, improving the domestic investment climate. However, the Free Trade Agreement does not offer a perspective of Ukraine joining the EU.. The greatest challenge to Ukraine is developing a strategy to take advantage of the Association Agreement and finding money and the human resources to implement it.

5.   Conclusion

The space between empires is defined by its Soviet past and aspirations of Western modernity. Nonetheless post-Soviet states between the EU and Russia have not actually been able to transition to becoming "normal" Western states, resulting in hybrid systems that have been the status quo for the past 25 years.

"These developments combined with the fact that there is no membership perspective for any of the three countries in the near future means that all countries in the region will continue to be defined by their status between empires and mixed systems."

The signing of Association Agreements between Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova and the EU has created closer relations, but this association is happening at a time when there is increasing doubt within the EU about what it stands for and what its own political future looks like. These developments combined with the fact that there is no membership perspective for any of the three countries in the near future means that all countries in the region will continue to be defined by their status between empires and mixed systems challenging linear and convergent transitional models of development. At the same time the "Revolution of Dignity" in

Ukraine has begun the process of positively defining the region and reviving values and ideology connected to Western values but interpreted locally.

Currently both economically and politically the region is characterized by instability. High inflation, trade deficits and debt characterize the economies of the region economically, making it vulnerable to economic crisis. Politically weak institutions hinder the democratic process where it exists in the region, creating opportunities for abuse. In Ukraine in particular the influence of money in politics has allowed a small class of oligarchs to not only dominate the economy but also politics. The success of the "Revolution of Dignity," however, showed that there were limits on that influence when popular protests forced an about face on signing the Association Agreement with the EU. It also demonstrated how weak institutions provide other mechanisms for checking officials even when the influence of oligarchs weakens the effectiveness of traditional democratic channels.

For much of their modern history these countries have been centers for experiments. In the Soviet Union the experiments focused on radically breaking with the past and achieving utopian ends, where since the collapse of the Soviet Union experiments have focused on catching up with the "normal societies" of Western Europe. As part of that process trying to instill values and Western ways of operating has been a major objective of both Western development policy and local pro-Western elites. Those two working together have been the most successful in Georgia, where time and consistent commitment have yielded the most significant results. The aims of these efforts have not only been to adopt EU standards for goods and government, but create conversations in civil society and social media similar to those in Western societies about the importance and protection of freedoms and human rights. These two issues reached their height with the "Revolution of Dignity" in Ukraine, which showed an internalization and adaption of these values that both pushed for closer association with the EU, and an internal respect for individual and human rights. These experiments and the degree to which they are applied will differentiate countries in the region moving them from a shared past to divergent futures. For the foreseeable future, however, the region will continue to play its historic role as a place of experiments meant to achieve radical change in pursuit of greater economic stability and accountability.

Appendix 1: Program

I.   POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND OPEN SOCIETIES

PANEL ONE:

Huseyn ALIYEV (University of Oxford)
When Informal Institutions Change: Institutional Reforms and Informal Practices in the Former Soviet Union

Zuzana NOVAKOVA (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
Consolidation and Contestation of Regime Characteristics in Ukraine's Recent History

Kostiantyn FEDORENKO (Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, Kyiv)
Political Transformations and Party Systems Developments in Ukraine: Observing Interconnections

Moderation: Maksym YAKOVLYEV (NaUKMA)

PANEL TWO:

Dorit HAPP (Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig)
Civil Activism in Small and Peripheralised Cities in Ukraine and Belarus

Dennis REDEKER (Bremen International Graduate School for Social Sciences)
CSO's vs Online Surveillance – Transnationalization and Agenda Setting of Civil Society in Georgia

Denys YAKOVLEV (National University Odessa Law Academy)
Leviathan in Matrix: Mass Media in Post-Communist Ukraine

Moderation: André HÄRTEL (NaUKMA)

PANEL THREE:

Aliaksandr HERASIMENKA (University of Westminster)
Transformation of the Belarusian Political Landscape in the Era of Digital Platforms

Shota KAKABADZE (University of Tartu)
Not European Enough? How Liberals and Populists in Georgia Make Use of It

Natia MECHITISHVILI (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Vienna)
Migration Management in EaP Countries – Georgia and Armenia

Moderation: Mykhailo MINAKOV (NaUKMA)

II.   POST-SOVIET CAPITALISMS AND NATIONAL ECONOMIES

PANEL FOUR:

Aliaksei ZHURAULIOU (National Academy of Statistics, Kyiv)
Comparative Analysis of Post-Soviet Economic Transformations in Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia

Iryna SOLONENKO (Viadrina European University Frankfurt (Oder))
Oligarchic Strategies of Wealth Defense: Explaining Varying Reactions to Attempts to Change the Social Contract

Moderation: Johann ZAJACZKOWSKI (Zeit-Stiftung Fellow)

III.   CHALLENGES OF GLOBALIZATION AND MULTIPOLARITY

PANEL FIVE:

André HÄRTEL
Finding their Own Path: Transformation, Globalization and the Role of Political Ideas in the (new) Post-Soviet Space

Johann ZAJACZKOWSKI
The Development of Ukraine's Political Order and the Russo-Ukrainian War

Mykhailo MINAKOV
Report on 'Post-Soviet Political and Economic Experiments'

Moderation: Iryna SOLONENKO

PANEL SIX:

Aron BUZOGÁNY (University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna)
Dimensions of Overlapping Integration in the Post-Soviet Space

Maryna RABINOVYCH (I.I. Mechnikov National University Odessa)
DCFTA Agreements as a Means to Private Sector Development in the 'Contested Neighborhood'

Darina DVORNICHENKO (National University Odessa Law Academy)
Ukraine's Europeanization: Challenges and Perspectives

Moderation: Zuzana NOVAKOVA

Appendix 2: Pictures