

SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET POLITICS AND SOCIETY
Edited by Dr. Andreas Umland

Ivan Katchanovski

Cleft Countries

*Regional Political Divisions and Cultures in
Post-Soviet Ukraine and Moldova*

With a foreword by Francis Fukuyama



ibidem

Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society (SPPS)

ISSN 1614-3515

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ISSN 1614-3515

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Regional Political Divisions and Cultures
in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Moldova

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ibidem-Verlag
Stuttgart

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Cover picture: Demonstrators from Western Ukraine during the "Orange Revolution" on Maidan in Kyiv city in the end of 2004. Printed with kind permission from ©Tammy Lynch.

ISSN: 1614-3515

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-5558-3

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Stuttgart, Germany 2014

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To my mother, who taught me my first lessons in comparative politics

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Foreword

The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and the latter's breakup into a series of successor states, is the closest thing we have to a controlled laboratory experiment in political science. The formal political institutions of the communist world were all – in theory, at least – identical to one another: each was ruled by a vanguard party espousing Marxist-Leninist ideology; each had a centralized, hierarchical authoritarian party-state structure; each had a centrally planned economy; and each sought to suppress religion, ethnicity, and nationality as political categories in favor of a universal socialist citizenship. Communist central planning tried to equalize incomes across different regions, and education was stamped out of a single mold. And yet, when the system broke down between 1989 and 1991, a huge variance in transition outcomes emerged. Estonia, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic all made a rapid transition to both stable democracies and market economies, eventually joining both NATO and the European Union. At the other end of the scale, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all ended up either as outright dictatorships, or else as what Thomas Carothers has labeled “feckless democracies” that are highly corrupt, economically stagnant, and democratic in name only. Somewhere in the middle are countries like Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria, which neither made a smooth transition to democracy, nor were consumed by ethnic conflict.

What accounts for this enormous variation in outcome, when the starting conditions were supposedly so similar? A number of theories have fallen victim to the comparative realities of the former communist world. For example, the standard neoclassical growth models would have predicted that those successor states with the largest initial stocks of physical and human capital like Russia or Ukraine should have done the best in making the economic transitions to market economies. Yet these countries grew much less quickly than less industrialized ones like the Baltic States. Geography and the distance of a country from major world centers of trade and industry might explain a great deal, given that countries further away from Western Europe tended to do worse; and yet, why has isolated Mongolia fared better in terms of both political and economic development than most of the Central Asian “stans”? Ethnicity or the prospects for ethnic conflict might be another important explanatory factor; yet the existence of ethnic divisions only begs the further question as to why some ethnically divided countries like the former Yugoslavia, Moldova, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan exploded into civil war or external ethnic conflict, while others like Ukraine did not.

Ivan Katchanovski rigorously tests various competing theories of transition in *Cleft Countries: Regional Political Divisions and Cultures in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Moldova*. Using both quantitative methodology and in-depth historical case studies, he looks at two countries, Ukraine and Moldova, that are divided along ethnic, religious, and regional lines. He finds that political culture more than any other factor explains both the political differences between the divided parts of these countries, and also why these divided countries have had different outcomes in terms of ethnic conflict.

Katchanovski notes that political culture is not the same thing as the “culture factor” used by observers like Samuel Huntington to explain ethnic conflict. Indeed, he finds that traditional markers of culture like religion (i.e., whether one is Orthodox, Catholic, etc.) are not terribly powerful as explanatory variables. Political behavior in the post-Soviet transition period was much more readily explained by habits of mind and action acquired during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rather than ancient cultural identities. Experiences of occupation, rule, liberation, and integration all played important roles in shaping national consciousness, and in changing political behavior for better or worse.

Political culture is a variable that has fallen out of favor with many social scientists in recent years, in part because it is hard to define precisely or to measure. And yet, when looking at the nationalist ferment in Ukraine when compared to the passivity in neighboring authoritarian Belarus, it is hard not to see that political culture is incredibly important. *Cleft Countries* thus makes an important contribution both to the growing literature on post-Soviet transitions, as well as to the broader literature on political culture and political development.

Francis Fukuyama
McLean, Virginia
January 4, 2006

Acknowledgements

This book benefited greatly from the advice and suggestions of many people. I am indebted to Seymour Martin Lipset for his guidance and support from the very first steps of this study. I am thankful to Francis Fukuyama, Don Kash, Don Lavoie, and Ilya Prizel for their valuable advice, comments, and suggestions on this manuscript. Robert Crews; Charles King; Peter Reddaway; Philip Roeder; Olga Shvetsova; the participants of the 2001 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting in San Francisco; the 2005 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting in Washington, DC; and the 2000 and 2004 Annual World Conventions of the Association for the Study of the Nationalities in New York provided beneficial input for various parts of this study.

I would like to acknowledge Hans Klingemann from Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin for providing the World Values Survey datasets; the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, which funded the Laitin/Hough surveys; and David Laitin, the principal investigator who directed the surveys and supplied the datasets. The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology provided regional results of its surveys in Ukraine. I am also thankful to Peter Craumer and Vicki Hesli for supplying the census data on education, the International Foundation for Election Systems for providing data on elections in Moldova, and Samuel Huntington for permitting me to use the term that he coined as the title of the book. This study benefited from conversations and helpful sug-

gestions from many other individuals from Ukraine, Moldova, the United States, and Canada.

I am greatly indebted to the editor of the *ibidem* series *Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, Andreas Umland. Brenda Belokrinicev and Nicola Scott were responsible for ensuring that the manuscript is free from English language mistakes. This book uses a standard English transliteration of Cyrillic, except in cases of commonly used names and places.

Last, but not least, I would like to acknowledge my mother, Sophia Katchanovski, for my first real-life lessons in comparative politics. Because of changes in international borders, she experienced the politics of four countries first-hand, as well as the Nazi genocide, the Soviet terror, and ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe, without ever moving on her own.

1 Introduction

Since the collapse of Communism and the end of the Cold War, regional divisions, ranging from significant territorial voting differences to intra-state conflicts, have manifested in many countries in different parts of the world. The most notable examples of this include: Kosovo, Bosnia, and Macedonia in the former Yugoslavia; Chechnya and Tatarstan in Russia; Kashmir and Punjab in India; Northern Afghanistan; Quebec and the Western provinces in Canada; Northern Ireland and Wales in the United Kingdom; Southern Sudan; Northern Nigeria; and the Chiapas in Mexico.

Ukraine and Moldova are two post-Communist countries with sharp regional divisions.¹ They became independent states after the failed coup of August 1991 and the break-up of the Soviet Union in December 1991. In all elections and referendums held since 1991, Western regions of Ukraine have supported nationalist, pro-independence and pro-Western parties and politicians, while Eastern regions of Ukraine have backed pro-Communist and pro-Russian parties and politicians. The regional differences are extensive. For example, official results of the repeat second round of the presidential elections in December 2004 showed that Viktor Yushchenko received more than 93 percent of the vote in three Galicia (Halychyna) regions in Western Ukraine and 4–6 percent in two Donbas (Donbass) regions in Eastern Ukraine. Conversely, Viktor Yanukovich, a pro-Russian candidate, received more than 90 percent of the vote in the Donbas regions and less than 5 percent of the vote in the Galicia regions.

Some Ukrainian, Russian, and Western politicians and observers raised possibilities of civil war and territorial disintegration of Ukraine as a result of sharp regional polarization during the 2004 presidential elections and a

¹ See Aarrevaara, 1998; Aberg, 2000; Barrington, 1997; Birch, 2000a, 2000b; Clem and Craumer, 2005; Craumer and Clem, 1999; Hesli, 1995; Hesli, Reisinger, and Miller, 1998; Kaufman, 1996; Khmelko and Wilson, 1998; Kolsto, 2002; Kubicek, 2000; Malanchuk, 2005; Miller, Klobucar, and Reisinger, 2000; Miller, White and Heywood, 1998; Shulman, 1999a; Crowther, 1997a, 1997b; European Centre for Minority Issues, 1997; Kaufman, 1996; King, 2000; Kolsto and Malgin, 1998; O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Tchepalyga, 1998; Wilson, 2005.

political crisis that followed. (See, for example, Finn, 2004, and Stephen, 2004.) According to Ukrainian and Western media reports and to my personal observations, more than one million people, mostly from Western regions of Ukraine and the city of Kyiv, took to the streets to protest falsification of the results of the second round of the elections and in support of Viktor Yushchenko. The Kuchma administration came very close to using military force against Yushchenko supporters, some of whom favored a violent seizure of power.

Many local authorities, predominantly in the Western part of Ukraine, recognized Viktor Yushchenko as president; however, local authorities in a number of Eastern regions backed Viktor Yanukovych, and threatened to declare an autonomous republic or hold a referendum on the federalization of Ukraine. In the beginning of the 1990s, a similar separatism emerged in the Crimea region when it gained autonomous status within Ukraine.

In the middle of the 1990s, the CIA predicted the break-up of Ukraine along regional lines and a Yugoslavia-style civil war.² In 2005, the Fund for Peace identified Ukraine as a country in danger of disintegration; the American organization placed Ukraine in this group along with such countries as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, Uzbekistan, and Tanzania. ("Failed States Index," 2005.)

A significant proportion of Ukrainians thought that a break-up of Ukraine was a real possibility. The 2005 survey conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine showed that every fifth respondent (19 percent of Ukrainians) believed that a break-up of Ukraine was the biggest fear among the people of Ukraine. From 11 to 16 percent of the respondents expressed the same opinion in annual surveys conducted in 1999-2004. (Panina, 2005, p. 87.)

A survey, conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in 2005, showed that more than a third of all respondents (35 percent), which corresponds to almost half of Ukrainians (42 percent) who had a definite opinion, considered an East-West division in Ukraine as a divide between hostile sides. Journalists from *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, which commissioned the survey that asked this question, described the regional division as a gulf separat-

² See "Better Later than Never, Maybe", 1995.

ing Easterners from Westerners, and concluded that a significant proportion of Ukrainians regarded their compatriots in other regions as enemies. (Mostova and Rakhmanin, 2005.)

However, such assessments are not necessarily reliable. The CIA has a poor track record in its evaluations of political developments in a number of key cases. The American spy agency failed to predict the break-up of the Soviet Union. The CIA gave a wrong assessment with regard to the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The Fund for Peace based its identification of Ukraine as a state in danger of disintegration on computer analysis of news reports. Media coverage affected Ukrainians' perceptions about the possibility of Ukraine's break-up. Similarly, sensationalist and anecdotal stories in Western and Ukrainian media created irrational fears about the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, fears that were grossly inflated compared with the conclusions of the scientists who studied these issues.

Moldova, a country much less studied than Ukraine, its bigger post-Soviet neighbor, offers a perfect case for comparison. Ukraine and Moldova differ in terms of their size, but their levels of economic development are similar. Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe after Russia in terms of its territory (603.7 thousand sq. km, or 233.1 thousand sq. miles) and fifth largest in terms of its population (49 million in 2002.) The territory and population of Ukraine are comparable to France's. Moldova is similar in terms of its size (33.7 thousand sq. km, or 13.1 thousand sq. miles) to Belgium. In terms of its population, Moldova (4.5 million in 1999) is comparable to Croatia or Norway. The Gross National Product (GNP) per capita at purchasing power parity exchange rate in 1995 was \$2,400 in Ukraine and \$2,070 in Moldova (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1997.) Ukraine is a more urbanized and industrialized country than Moldova, which is more rural and agricultural.

As in Ukraine, nationalist pro-Moldovan and pro-Romanian parties and politicians have received their strongest support in the Western (right-bank) part of Moldova. The Transdnistria region, in the East of the country, tried to preserve many elements of the Soviet political system and to secede from Moldova. This political conflict turned violent when the Transdnistrian secessionists, supported by the presence of Russian troops, declared their region independent from Moldova. Another dispute emerged between the

Gagauz-populated districts in the South and the Central government of Moldova. However, this conflict was solved peacefully, and the Gagauz region gained substantial autonomy.

Political scientists – who study why people in different regions have different political attitudes, vote for different parties and politicians, want to secede from their neighbors, and engage in violent clashes – have developed various theories to explain regional cleavages and conflicts. They have identified economic, ethnic, cultural, religious, and political leadership issues as factors of regional division. Economic theories focus on the self-interest of politicians and disparities in levels and structures of economic development. Theories of ethnicity and religion emphasize the function of ethnic and religious differences, language, and nationalism. Theories of leadership stress the role that political leaders and elites play in regional divisions, claiming that the power struggle among domestic leaders and involvement of foreign leaders are the elite-level causes of regional conflicts. Political culture theories emphasize the value differences that have evolved from religious, historical, and other similar divisions.

Previous studies have identified ethnic, economic, religious, and cultural factors that affect regional cleavages and conflicts in post-Communist Ukraine and Moldova. In this study, *the first question* is – how significant is the role of culture when compared with other factors in the regional political divisions in these countries? This book tests the hypothesis that regional political culture, which has emerged as a result of different historical experiences, accounts for a significant part of the variation in support for nationalist/pro-Western and Communist/pro-Russian parties and politicians across regions of Ukraine and Moldova.

The second question is – which factor or factors turn regional political cleavages into violent conflicts? This study uses a comparison of two neighboring post-Soviet countries – post-Communist Ukraine and Moldova, which have many similarities in terms of their historical development, political systems, economies, and other factors – to determine which factors transform regional political cleavages into violent conflict.

This book examines the role of political culture in relation to economic, ethnic, and leadership factors in regional political divisions in Ukraine and Moldova from 1991 to 2005. It argues that culture – which has emerged

as a result of distinct historical institutions, policies, and experiences – plays a major role in regional political divisions.

Ukraine and Moldova both consist of regions that have belonged to different states for significant historical periods. For a great span of time, the territory and population of Ukraine were divided among the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. After World War I, Eastern Ukraine and the Transdnestrian region of Moldova belonged to the Soviet Union, while Western Ukrainian regions became parts of Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. Moldova's Western province, called Bessarabia, belonged to Romania between World War I and World War II.

The pre-World War II division is used in this study to distinguish between Western Ukraine and Eastern Ukraine and between Western Moldova (Bessarabia) and Eastern Moldova (Transdnestria). This definition of Western and Eastern regions underlines different historical legacies. Western Ukraine refers to part of Ukraine that was not only located in the geographical West but that also had a distinct history of its own before World War II; Eastern Ukraine refers to all other regions that are located to the east of Western Ukraine. Such definitions were common before World War II, and they remain widespread in present-day Ukraine. The use of this dichotomy is as justified as the use of the historically-based Western Germany vs. East Germany dichotomy, and of the South vs. the North dichotomies in Italy and in the United States, in studies of regional cleavages in those countries.

The Soviet Union incorporated Western regions of Ukraine and Moldova as a result of World War II. For several decades, these regions experienced Soviet policies aimed at eliminating the economic, ethnic, and religious differences between them and their Eastern counterparts. For this reason, from a comparative perspective, post-Communist Ukraine and Moldova, like modern Italy and Germany, represent a quasi-experiment. (See Almond, 1983, Putnam, 1993, Rohrschneider, 1996.)

Political systems, institutions, and policies in Ukrainian and Moldovan regions of the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy differed significantly. Large differences characterized political and economic systems, institutions, and policies of Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union during the interwar period. Nazi and

Romanian policies in Ukrainian and Moldovan regions throughout World War II reinforced these variations.

For example, political institutions and policies in Ukrainian regions in the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy created more favorable conditions for the development of Ukrainian nationalism and national identity than was the case in the Russian Empire. These conditions included a more democratic political system, along with educational and religious policies that were more supportive of the formation of Ukrainian national identity. The existence and activity of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church helped to promote Ukrainian national identity in Galicia, a region that was part of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. During World War II, the Nazi policy towards Ukrainians was less severe in Galicia than in other regions of Ukraine.

Historical conditions were also more favorable for the development of national identity in Western Moldova, the historical region of Bessarabia, than in the Transdnistria region. The differences in political systems and policies were most significant during the inter-war period, when Western Moldova was unified with Romania and the Autonomous Moldovan Republic, which included all of Transdnistria, was part of Soviet Ukraine.

The focus on the West-East divisions in Ukraine and Moldova involves a certain simplification of political regionalisms in these post-Communist countries. This simplification, which relies on historical differences, in no way denies existence of other types of regional cleavages, as for example between capital cities and neighboring regions in Ukraine and Moldova, or between Central regions and Eastern regions in Ukraine.

This book links the political distinctiveness of Gagauzia in Moldova and Crimea in Ukraine to the differences in their historical legacies. The critical juncture in the evolution of Gagauz political culture was the nineteenth-century mass migration of the Gagauz people from Bulgaria to the Southern part of Moldova, with the aid of the Russian government, to avoid persecution by the Ottoman Empire.

In the case of Crimea, the historical experience of Ukrainians and Russians differed significantly from that of Crimean Tatars. For several centuries when Crimea was a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, the Crimean khanate carried out frequent raids in Ukraine and Southern Russia, during which a great number of Ukrainians and Russians were captured and sold as

slaves. The origin of Ukraine's name, which in Ukrainian means "the borderland" or "on the edge," is traced to this period. Ukraine was a frontier area of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Empire, which bordered the Ottoman Empire.

While the Russian conquest of Crimea ended slavery, it also had a significant affect on the historical experience of Crimean Tatars. To avoid discrimination and persecution by the Russian government, many Crimean Tatars migrated to the Ottoman Empire. Another important factor in the evolution of the political culture of the Crimean Tatars was their exile, mandated by Stalin, to Central Asia; this collective punishment was doled out because a fraction of Crimean Tatars collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.

This book uses the term *cleft countries* to refer to the considerable and persistent regional political cleavages in Ukraine and Moldova. Huntington (1996) also uses this term, though he uses it specifically in reference to countries divided along civilization lines that are defined by Western Christianity, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and other religions. He considers Ukraine as being divided between Catholic West and Orthodox East. However, this book will show that religion is not the primary factor responsible for the regional cleavages in Ukraine.

This study focuses on one dimension of political culture in regions of Ukraine and Moldova: pro-Communist/pro-Russian orientation versus pro-nationalist/pro-Western orientation. Other dimensions of political culture, such as democratic values, political tolerance, support for market reforms and privatization, and social capital will be discussed as they relate to the main focus of this book.³

It is important to emphasize that a vote for the Communist and nationalist parties does not necessarily imply complete support of their programs, or support for their most radical elements. Pro-Communist/pro-Russian political orientation refers to the support of political parties and candidates who are, to a significant extent, ideological successors of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union or those who favor closer ties with Russia. Similarly, the term pro-nationalist/pro-Western refers to a broad part of the

³ For the same approach extended to the analysis of social capital and privatization in regions of Ukraine and Moldova, see Katchanovski, 2001.

political spectrum. It encompasses Ukrainian and Moldovan nationalisms in either a civic form, which embraces ethnic minorities, or an exclusive ethnic form. This spectrum also includes advocacy for the independence of Ukraine and Moldova and a speedy integration of these countries into Western organizations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), as well as, in the case of Moldova, its unification with Romania.

This study argues that political culture is not stagnant, but evolves, albeit slowly, under the influence of institutions and policies. For example, differences in historical experience, not only between Western Ukraine and Eastern Ukraine but also within these regions, have contributed to differences in electoral behavior and political attitudes. This approach helps us to understand the political differences between Galicia and Volhynia, both of which are regions of Western Ukraine. While both these historical regions were part of Poland between World War I and World War II, Galicia was under Austrian rule and Volhynia was under Russian rule for more than a century before World War I. Such differences are often overlooked in studies of Ukrainian and Moldovan regionalism.

An analysis of the cultural legacy of historical institutions and policies is useful in understanding regional cleavages and conflicts not only in Ukraine and Moldova, but also in other regionally divided countries. For example, regional conflicts in the former Yugoslavia closely parallel historical divisions between the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire (Slovenia and Croatia vs. Serbia and Montenegro), while other conflicts parallel different historical experiences of Orthodox Christians and Muslims during the Ottoman rule (Kosovo, Bosnia, and Macedonia).

Region is the main unit of analysis in this study. This book compares political behavior and attitudes in different historical regions of Ukraine and Moldova: regions that experienced long periods of Russian and then Soviet rule; regions that were under Austro-Hungarian and then Polish, Romanian, and Czechoslovak rule until World War II; and regions with a legacy of the Ottoman rule. This study analyzes the regional results of all national elections and referendums held in Ukraine and Moldova between 1991-2005, as well as regional dimensions of a variety of survey data.

This book argues that, in contrast to the Transdnistria region of Moldova, the behavior of regional, national, and foreign leaders contributed to the absence of violent regional conflicts in Ukraine. For reasons of ideology and self-interest, political leaders in Transdnistria, with the support of the 14th Russian army, chose a separatist option, which turned into a violent conflict. The de facto independence of the Transdnistrian Republic satisfied both rent-seeking interests and the pro-Russian orientation of its leadership. Similar factors motivated political leaders in Ukraine to choose a different option. The main ideological goal of nationalist leaders in Western Ukraine was reached when Ukraine became an independent state. A significant number of these leaders were accommodated by access to positions of power. Many of the former Communist and pro-Russian leaders, such as Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, radically changed their political orientation to maintain power. The actions of certain key national, regional, and foreign leaders prevented the major political crisis in Ukraine at the end of 2004 from escalating into violent conflict.

This study deals with regions of Ukraine and Moldova, but it also provides insight on the significant disparities in the political development of post-Communist countries in Eastern Central Europe and the former Soviet Union; the geographic patterns of differentiation among these countries parallel those of Ukrainian and Moldovan regions. The most successful political reforms have taken place in the countries located in the Western part of the former Communist domain, such as Poland, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the Baltic States. These countries have achieved more progress in their democratization and integration into the European Union and NATO than countries located further to the East. Democratization and political reforms have been much more limited in Central Asian states, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Serbia, Macedonia, and Russia. Most of the countries in the first group, like many regions in Western Ukraine, share the legacy of Austro-Hungarian rule before World War I, while the countries in the second group, like Eastern Ukraine, experienced Russian and Ottoman rule.⁴ (See Katchanovski, 2000; Katchanovski and La Porte, 2005.)

⁴ Some scholars argue that it is not political culture but other factors, such as geographic proximity to Western Europe or initial post-Communist elections, that are

This book employs both comparative and statistical methods. A comparative approach is used in the analysis of regional voting patterns in post-Communist elections and referendums. An analysis of the evolution of regional political culture, religious and ethnic cleavages, and the role of political leadership relies on comparative historical methods. Statistical methods are used to analyze regional voting data and data from the World Values Surveys in Ukraine and Moldova and the Laitin/Hough survey in Moldova.⁵

This study utilizes historical sources, not only from the West, but also from Ukraine and Moldova. Such an approach corrects the ideological interpretations prevalent under Soviet rule and, to some extent, in the post-Communist period, as well as biases in the Western scholarship of these countries. The Soviet state and regimes in other Communist countries promoted an ideological view of history; they relied on party propaganda, and banned research into and public discussion of many crucial historic events, such as mass political terror and famines in Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Moldova in the 1930s and 1940s. Cold War politics and other related factors affected research on Ukraine and Moldova in the West. For example, many Western studies that discuss World War II in Ukraine fail to take into account regional differences, and thus often denote Eastern Ukrainians as Russians or Soviets. Davies (1996, p. 54) states the following in his study of European history:

Their [Ukrainian] population is similar in size to that of England or France, and contains important minorities; but the Ukrainians find very little place in the history books. For many years, they were presented to the outside world as 'Russians' or 'Soviets' whenever they were to be praised, and as 'Ukrainians' only when they did evil.

Similarly, most Western studies of the Ottoman Empire overlook Ukrainian and Russian slavery in the Crimean khanate, as well as the forced migration of tens of thousands of the Gagauz, Bulgarians, and other Orthodox

chiefly responsible for the cross-national variation among post-Communist countries. (See Fish, 1998; Kopstein and Reilly, 2000.) These factors are much less important at the regional level in Ukraine and Moldova.

⁵ The Laitin/Hough survey was also conducted in Ukraine, but it included only regions of Eastern Ukraine.

Christians from the Ottoman Empire to Southern Moldova and Ukraine under Russian rule. (See, for example, Lieven, 2001; and Quataert, 2000.)

Historians have studied Ukrainian and Moldovan regions as part of the histories of the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Ottoman Empire, Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union. For this reason, they still debate whether Ukraine has its own history. (See Hagen, 1995; Plokhly, 1995.) Very few studies have examined the historical development of all regions of Ukraine and Moldova (see King, 2000; Magocsi, 1996; Subtelny, 1988; Szporluk, 1979).

This book is the first comprehensive study to analyze regional political divisions in Ukraine and Moldova from a comparative perspective. Research into the politics of the former Soviet Union has often been confined to Russia. Since Ukraine and Moldova became independent states after the collapse of Communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, studies of their political development have grown significantly.

However, most of these studies examine one country at a time. They are often unable to define the role of the various factors causing regional divisions because economic, ethnic, language, religious, and cultural differences coexist. For example, Transdnistria, which seceded *de facto* from Moldova, is a more economically developed region with a large proportion of Russian speakers, most of whom are ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. In addition, Transdnistria, in contrast to other regions of Moldova, had not been part of Romania for a long period of time. Moldovans descend from the Dacian people in the Roman Empire and Vlachs, while Ukrainians and Russians are Slavs. The Moldovan language is a dialect of Romanian, and is similar to other Latin languages such as Italian and French; even though Ukrainian and Russian are separate languages, Ukrainian, like some other Slavic languages, can be largely understood by a Russian speaker and vice versa.

The Gagauz, concentrated in the South of Moldova, are Turkic-speaking people, but they are Orthodox Christians like the majority of the Moldovan population. Other regionally concentrated Turkic ethnic groups are predominantly Muslim. Since the Gagauz are unique in this aspect, the study of their political behavior and attitudes is especially interesting when juxtaposed with religious experience.