

# THE TURBULENT LAND: POWER STRUGGLE AND DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINE

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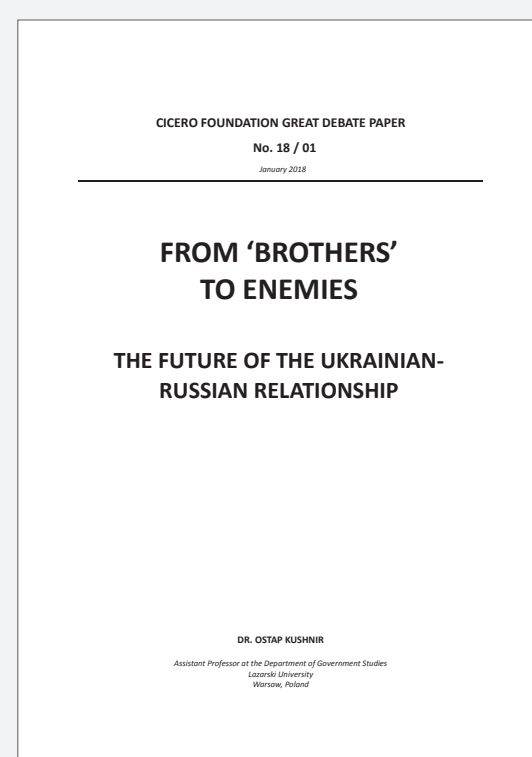
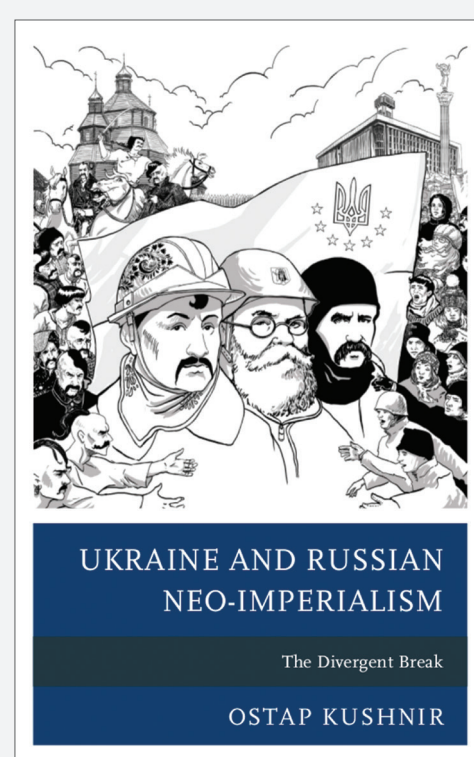
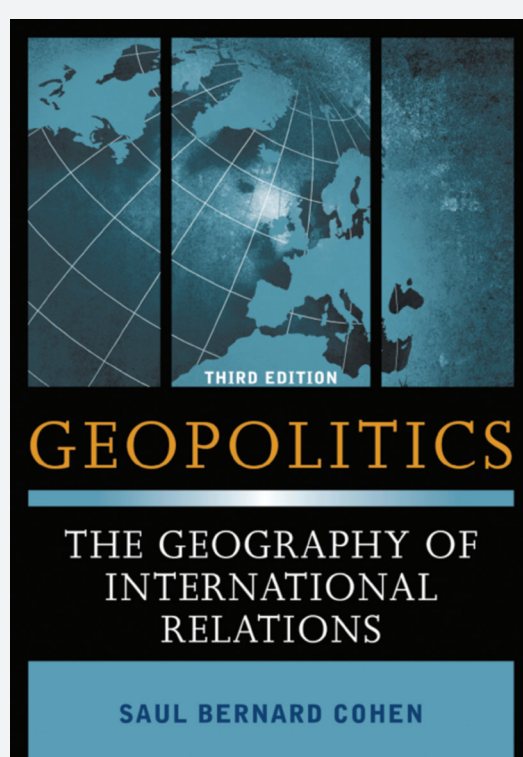
## ■ Introduction and Problem Statement

Social and political processes taking place in Ukraine after 1990 – specifically Euromaidan and the War in Donbas – are nothing new under the sun. They fit the overall geopolitical logics for the Eastern European region. They may also be defined as extremes, but not exceptions.

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine is the one of historically reoccurring on these lands. Ukraine lies in the intersections of numerous geopolitical actors, influences, and interests. It lies in the Eastern European corridor. Therefore, it will always remain a decentralized, unstable, and contested territory.

### Research Questions

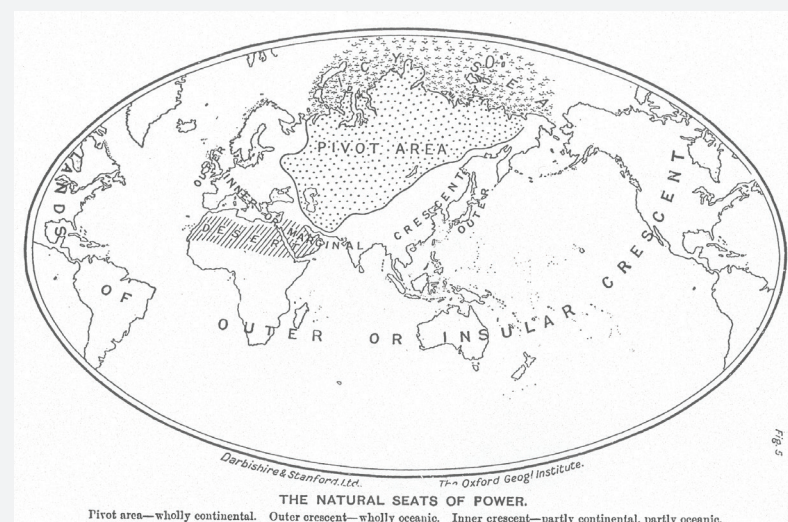
1. What was the historical dynamics of conflicts on the territory of Ukraine: from Genghis Khan to Putin?
2. What is the historical experience of statecraft and nationhood in Ukraine?  
How does it influence the ongoing political processes?
3. What is the natural geopolitical modus operandi for Ukraine?  
What are the prerequisites for it to come into being?



## ■ Methodological remarks

### Halford Mackinder in *The Geographical Pivot of History*, 1904:

For a thousand years a series of horse riding peoples emerged from Asia through the broad interval between the Ural mountains and the Caspian sea, rode through the open spaces of southern Russia, and struck home into Hungary in the very heart of the European peninsula ... That they stimulated healthy and powerful reaction, instead of crushing opposition under a widespread despotism, was due to the fact that the mobility of their power was conditioned by the steppes, and necessarily ceased in the surrounding forests and mountains.

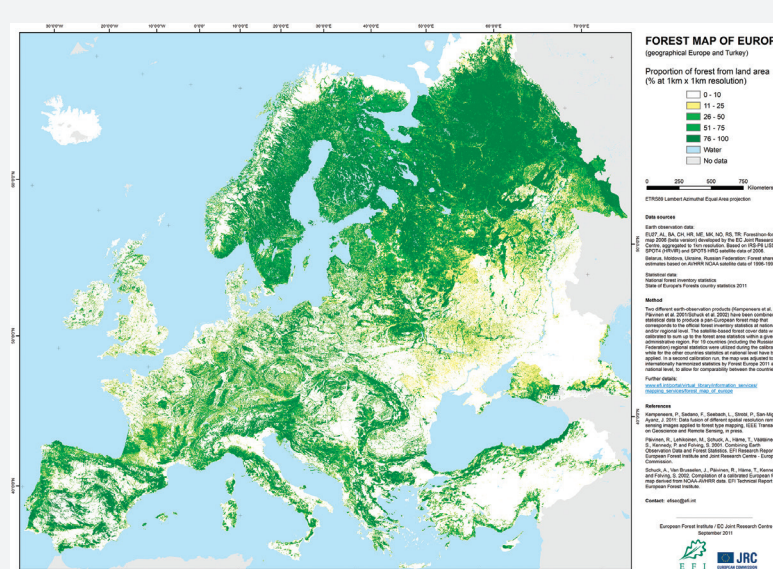


### Halford Mackinder in *The Geographical Pivot of History*, 1904:

Perhaps the change of greatest intrinsic importance ... was the southward migration of the Russian peasants, so that, whereas agricultural settlements formerly ended at the forest boundary, the centre of the population of all European Russia now lies to south of that boundary, in the midst of the wheat-fields which have replaced the more western steppes. Odessa has here risen to importance with the rapidity of an American city.

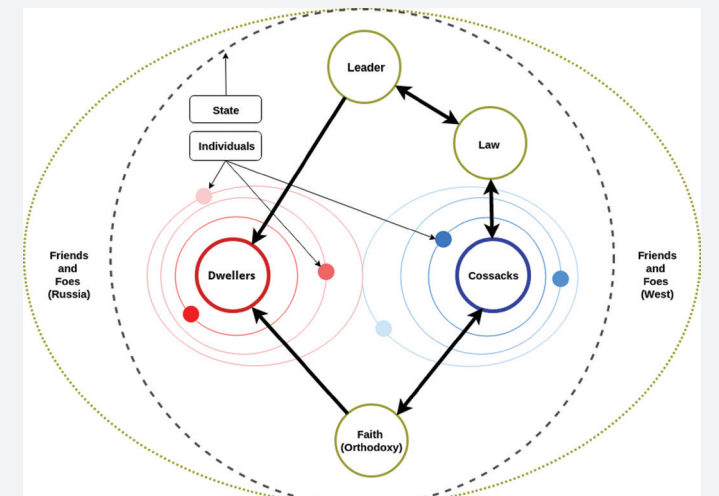
### Halford Mackinder in *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 1919:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.



## ■ Major findings

Bearing in mind the geopolitical location of Ukraine (i.e. in a core of Halford Mackinder's Eastern European corridor to the Heartland), the history of intercultural interactions (i.e. interactions of settled European „farmers“ and Asian „nomads“ in dynamic peripheral areas), and absent bits of statehood experience in collective memory, Ukrainians seem to develop a very partial, and thus unique vision of justice and order.



**Ukrainian political tradition is dichotomous** as it reflects the historical experience of interaction between Asian nomads and European farmers. It is chaotic, improvisational, and decentralized. It allows the existence of numerous poles of power in Ukraine (i.e. a permanent competition between oligarchs, embedded politicians, state administrations, civic institutions, street leaders, etc), as well as a comparatively tolerant coexistence of religions and nationalities.

**Ukraine is democratic „by default.“** However, this is a very immature and unrefined kind of democracy which evolved in the Eastern European corridor only. It is „chaotic“ with numerous authorities and poles of power competing.

**Ukrainian policy-making** has always been propelled by rallying of a critical mass of people around two major identity pillars: Conformist **Dwellers** or non-conformist **Cossacks**. Partisans of the first were prone to adjust to the existing social and political realities while partisans of the second were willing to challenge these realities or even re-forge them. Partisans of both pillars have always pursued their exclusive understanding of statehood, leadership, law, and religion.

## ■ Major findings

**Ukraine may be defined as a state of a „non-historical“ nation.** Regardless of numerous attempts to gain independence in the past, until 1991 none of them was successful. Therefore, contemporary Ukraine is missing the refined tradition of statehood.



A number of semi-state formations which existed in the Eastern European corridor earlier **could not nurture the tradition of statehood**. The power of Kyiv Rus was scattered between its cities and princes. This eventually led to the defeat of clustered Rus armies by „centralized“ Mongols. What followed was a Cossack colonization of „wild“ steppes and construction of a city-fortress Zaporozhian Sich with a unique –for middle ages– democratic flavour, economic self-sufficiency, and set of laws. Sich was destroyed by a centralized attack of Russian imperial armies in 1775.

**Historical developments re-occurring in the Eastern European corridor demonstrate two geopolitical regularities** (at least, two):

1. Semi-states and nations from the corridor usually fell under the assaults of more centralized aggressors.
2. When conquered, these semi-states and nations constituted the hearth of instabilities for the centralized rule. They were ready to „explode“ under favourable circumstances. This is what happened in 1991 when Ukraine successfully proclaimed its long-awaited sovereignty. This is what had its continuation in Orange Revolution and Euromaidan as revolutions against the abuses of centralized governance.



## ■ Conclusions

**Post-communist Ukraine is in the midst of implementing reforms** which it missed for centuries. This process is hampered by external pressure (Russian „hybrid“ interferences) and nation-wide unrefined visions of indigenous justice and order.

Ukraine gradually evolves into a unique geopolitical entity which, finally, acquires a fair chance to be consistent and self-sufficient. This evolution, however, is influenced by stochastic explosions of the Cossack-type activism in the environment of a commonly shared feeling of relative deprivation.

In this light **Western guidance is of a vital importance**. It may also become a major blow to Russia's neo-imperial expansionist ambitions.

Western guidance may also allow Ukraine to grow into a regional powerhouse and security guarantor, sympathetic to the West, but non-aligned with it rigidly. A proper geopolitical „gateway“ state.

**Western guidance should be nothing more, but a guidance.** Any kind of rigid conditionality and the export of values may bring more harm than benefits. It may start a new anti-Western revolution.

## ■ Conclusions

If the West takes a neutral stance today a „decentralized“, Ukraine will fall again under the centralized Russian assault. This will also introduce a „temporary“ pacification of the conflict as Ukraine's geopolitical inclination towards decentralization and multiple poles of power will lead to the emergence of new unrests / revolutions / conflicts in future.

If Russian expansionism is contained with the Western assistance, there emerges a fair chance to establish a new equilibrium in Eastern Europe. Ukraine will evolve into a proper „gateway“ state securing mutual-beneficial cooperation between two global powers. The key ideas and findings of this research will constitute a backbone to my new book **Gateway Ukraine: Maneuvering Between Europe and Asia**.