

# **The impact of symbolic political cleavages on the elites' strategies in divided societies – the case of Bosnia and Ukraine**

## **HYPOTHESIS**

The symbolic position of Bosnia and Ukraine in international hierarchies as semi-peripheral countries determines the character of their political cleavages. The global symbolic inequalities are translated into the local hierarchies of power which exist between different entities. Since the state-building processes in both countries are driven by external actors the attitude towards the West is the main axis of political divisions. It shapes to a great extent the strategies of the local elites which belong to the different political entities. A lack of recognition and the threat of discrimination are the prevailing emotions which are incorporated into collective narratives of the separatist elites. The process of power centralization ("Europeanisation" as a discourse) which has been set up by the elites that are close to the West is contested by Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina and some members of the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine as the forms of institutional violence and symbolic domination. The separatist elites expect to gain symbolic recognition not only from their local rivalries but also from the external elites.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- to build up the multi-level conceptual framework for explaining the social conflicts in semi-peripheral countries;
- to specify the role of symbolic political cleavages in the state-building processes in Bosnia and Ukraine;
- to explain the link between the actors' separatist strategies and prevailing symbolic divisions in Bosnia and Ukraine;
- to examine the theory of non-recognition in the study of divided societies.

## **THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The theoretical model I intend to build upon relies on the analysis of three levels of social reality; macro-, meso- and micro. Depending on the level of analysis I apply the proper theory. At the macro level it is the world-systems theory which I find the most useful for describing the structural and symbolic factors that define the position of Ukraine and Bosnia in the global hierarchy and show how these inequalities are translated in domestic politics. At the meso level, I define the political cleavages which are linked to the actors' attitudes to the West and their commitment to the existing institutional arrangements. At the micro level, I examine the actors' discursive practices and positions in the peripheral field of power by applying Bourdieu's theory of capitals and Lindemann's theory of non-recognition – both of which provide the powerful explanation for the separatist strategies of the local elites.

There are historical, symbolic and geopolitical commonalities between Bosnia and Ukraine. Institutional legacies have been inherited from the period during which these two states were parts of larger, multi-ethnic political entities, i.e. Yugoslavia and Soviet Union, and in which the existing political and cultural identities were suppressed by the one-party regimes which used communist ideology (along with means of coercion) as a vehicle for legitimizing power and creating unity within the state. After the collapse of communism these countries

followed different paths of transition - in the case of Bosnia, full independence was preceded by ethnic strife and war, while in Ukraine conflict has arisen some time after independence resulting not only in power shifts but also in territorial loss. In both cases, the externally driven state-building process has not yet finished and the two countries consist of highly polarized societies and face institutional deadlock.

In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the internal ethnic divisions are institutionalized in the form of federal state which consists of Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The existing institutional arrangements are challenged by the Bosniak elite which tends to centralize the country and constrain the autonomy of Republika Srpska. On the other hand, the Serbian elite seeks to keep the current status of its entity but often uses the threat of disintegration of the country (separatist tendency). In Ukraine the institutional arrangements have been challenged by some Russian-speakers who identify with Russian culture as opposed to a Ukrainian identity, mainly inhabiting Eastern Ukraine. As a result the Ukrainian central government lost its authority not only in Crimea (annexed by Russia) but also two new so-called 'people's republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk.

The major factor that greatly influences political developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine, is related to their symbolic position in the hierarchy of states. In order to identify this hierarchy, I employ the world-systems perspective (Wallerstein, 1974) as a base for further research. The centre-periphery concept which is an integral aspect of this perspective assumes the existence of hierarchical relations between the countries and the mechanisms of dominance and dependence. There exists extensive literature on the use of this approach in the study of postcolonial countries in Africa, Latin America or Asia, but not much research has been done so far on the semi-peripheral countries located on the fringes of Europe (Todorova 1997, Blagojević 2009, Zarycki 2014). As Matthias István Köhler points out, referring to the countries from the region of Central and Eastern Europe, semi-peripheries serve as a buffer between the core (the West) and the peripheral areas, and protect the core states from an uprising of the periphery. What keeps societies together at the semi-periphery, is the ideology of catching-up with the core states (Kohler, 2012).

It is important to specify that the West has the status of the central culture (core) and Russia is perceived as a peripheral state. Despite being an influential and powerful country, especially in the context of the region, its dependence on the Western core in the cultural and economic fields is significant (Kagarlitsky, 2008). Therefore, in this research Russia is considered as an alternative "centre" neither for Bosnia or Ukraine.

Zarycki identifies three zones within the semi-peripheries which differ in their degree and nature of Western domination and by their construction of political scenes which translate Western domination and Western discourses in different ways. The first zone consists of the former communist countries which are the members of European Union. Ukraine belongs to the second zone which is a transitional sector between European Union and Russia or other peripheral countries. Even though the common trait for this zone is the Soviet legacy I also include Bosnia in this group as a country locked in between the first zone and the peripheral states of the third zone. The latter consists of countries such as Russia or Belarus which resist in many ways the influence of Western European institutions and the global system of power.

The theoretical model developed by Wallerstein and adjusted to the local context, helps to better comprehend the nature of political divisions in Ukraine and Bosnia. My assumption is that the external symbolic hierarchies and inequalities within the world-system

are translated into the national-level hierarchies. It entails the existence of the model of a peripheral field of power through which mechanisms of dependence as well as diverse social forces, including cultural and political process, are mediated. This generates two parallel reinterpretations of global and native discourses which could be identified as Euro-enthusiastic and Euro-sceptical discourses. Therefore, the prevailing political cleavages in both countries have a symbolic, “postcolonial” character. The main axis of divisions here is the attitude and “proximity” of local actors to the central culture, i.e. the West. Since the state-building processes in the semi-peripheral context of divided societies in Bosnia and Ukraine are mainly driven to varying degrees by Western actors, it appears essential to examine the nature of political cleavages. I apply Rokkan’s concept of cleavages (Rokkan and Urwin, 1983) in reference to the model of the state (unitary state vs federal state) and combine it with the international dimension of these divisions (pro-Western vs anti-Western). I further develop this concept analysing the field of power in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine as the countries which are confronting institutional deadlock and competing entities based either on ethnic or language distinctions.

In order to reconstruct the actors’ strategies, positions and practices I use Bourdieu’s theory of field of power as well as Lindemann’s theory of non-recognition. There are two main logics of explanation in social sciences which refer to the rational choice perspective (“logics of consequences”) and cultural theory (“logics of appropriateness”) (March and Olsen, 1989). Beyond these two means of explanation, there are theories which emphasize the symbolic aspects of human behaviour. Bourdieu examines the broader social context and location where general power is defined by the power of particular actors, by their location in a specific field as well as by the symbolic features of the discourse they use. Bourdieu’s assumption is that possession of capitals in particular those being simultaneously recognized as symbolic capital allows the exercise of symbolic violence towards others. In this sense, the dominant actor is able to present their values and goals as universal (Bourdieu). In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine, the dominance of non-material capital finds its manifestations in the discursive practices of the local elites.

In my analysis I adopt Lindemann’s concept of non-recognition (Lindemann, 2010) on the state-level and use it as a theoretical tool for explaining the conflicts between different political entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine. Lindemann, like Bourdieu, emphasizes the meaning of symbolic aspects in actors’ strategies and claims that non-recognition can be as much as an explanation of social conflict (war, ethnic conflict etc.) as that of other explicative variables, such as threats, power, or wealth. He formulates four hypotheses on non-recognition. The first two hypotheses refer to the constitution of security interests by the identities of political units. The first hypothesis relates to the impact of “role identity” in armed conflicts, meaning the way in which an entity defines the nature of its relations with other entities/states. It postulates that hubristic identities are a possible cause of (armed) conflict. The second hypothesis asserts that it is the absence of a collective identity which lowers recognition costs of the recourse to armed force. Hypothesis three and four are based on the premise that non-recognition of the accepted norms of an entity’s “dignity” such as rhetorical depreciations, stigmatisation, exclusion by the international community or inference in internal affairs cannot be easily ignored if one supposes that political units aspire to survive.

## **METHODOLOGY**

My research will have an interdisciplinary character and is inspired by multiple methods used by Pierre Bourdieu. Apart from using critical discourse analysis as a primary tool, I will also try to explore the insights from economics, political geography, sociology of elites, critical geopolitics and classical political science.

While building the conceptual framework, the thesis will be structured around content analysis of scholarly articles and works that collate with the strands of literature proposed as a theoretical foundation for this project. As concerns the research strategy, I apply the model developed by Vincent Pouliot in his paper on Bourdieu's methodological assumptions (Pouliot, 2013). First of all, I plan to use my current knowledge and experience of living in the Balkans as a source for ethnographical participation and observation. These experiences have already given me access to the general practices in the field of power in Bosnia and Herzegovina so I am able to reconstruct the local *doxa*. Relying on informal interviews, textual analysis of primary sources (including basic discourse analysis) I would like to gain sufficient knowledge to describe the general practices in the Ukrainian field of political power. The next step is to define the dispositional logic of practises, that is, the practical knowledge ("tacit" know-how, inarticulate knowledge) that makes practices possible. This entails determining the meaning that agents/actors attribute to their reality. For this purpose, I plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with local decision-makers, journalists and scholars. I will also use "relational biography" which will provide me with greater information on who those interviewed individuals are and where they come from in order to see the relationship between what they say and their own strategic positions (what institutions or political organisations they are attached to, what kind of other capital they possess etc.). The last stage will include positional logic and comprises three tasks: interpreting the rules of the game; mapping the distribution of symbolic resources; historicizing social struggles. I will begin by analysing the discursive practises which are a great source of information about contextual rules. These rules are also inscribed in a variety of social artefacts such as codes, symbols, objects etc., that structure the political field and impart it with shapes and texture. Apart from discourse analysis, I will seek to introduce social-network analysis which is a powerful tool to represent the structure of social relations within a given field. The last step is to historicize the field's *doxa* by reconstructing its evolution over time.

## **CONTRIBUTION**

My research offers a chance to provide a new, fresh theoretical perspective on the study of social conflicts in semi-peripheral countries. It may contribute significantly to the ongoing debate surrounding the sources of instability in countries of the Balkan region and Eastern Europe and on the role of international dimension(s) in domestic politics. It would also provide an interesting explanation for the link which exists between the country's symbolic position in international hierarchies and the elites' strategies aimed at secession. At the micro-level it examines the role of symbolic capital and the meaning of non-recognition in shaping the actors' behaviour. I would like to publish my research findings along with the accompanying theoretical model in multiple scientific articles and present the results at various conferences.

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