

# Transcript

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Hello and welcome to the Oxford Ukraine Hub podcast, a series of podcasts brought to you by the University of Oxford.

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The Oxford Ukraine Hub is an interdisciplinary network connecting expertise across the University of Oxford with international researchers and practitioners working on Ukraine-related issues.

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By placing Ukraine at the center of scholarly inquiry, we try to disrupt long-established hierarchies within Slavic and East European studies.

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Our podcast series brings together diverse voices and perspectives to explore Ukraine's past, present, and future through various disciplinary lenses.

00:00:37 Speaker 1

In 2025 and 2026, we are running a series of seminars.

00:00:43 Speaker 1

My name is Zbidia Voinovsky, and I am your host today.

00:00:48 Speaker 1

And today's episode features Dr.

00:00:50 Speaker 1

Natalia Kibita,

00:00:52 Speaker 1

who is a research associate at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies.

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She's also the author of a monograph which came out with Oxford University Press in 2024 entitled The Institutional Foundations of Ukrainian Democracy, Power Sharing, Regionalism and Authoritarianism.

00:01:13 Speaker 1

In this study, Natalia argues that Ukraine's enduring political structure, a weak central authority and strong regions,

00:01:22 Speaker 1

was not born in 1991 with Ukraine's independence.

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It actually has very deep roots into the Soviet era and even earlier in the revolutions of 1917.

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This institutional structure is a source of democratic resilience, Natalia argues, but it also presents challenges for building strong and inclusive institutions in Ukraine today.

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We will talk about Natalia's book and its implications for understanding the opportunities and challenges for state consolidation in Ukraine.

00:01:59 Speaker 1

Natalia, welcome to our podcast.

00:02:02 Speaker 1

It's great to have you here.

00:02:04 Speaker 2

Hello, Zbek.

00:02:05 Speaker 2

Great being with you.

00:02:07 Speaker 2

Sorry.

00:02:09 Speaker 1

Thank you, Natalia.

00:02:11 Speaker 1

Natalia, your book really stands out to me for several reasons.

00:02:14 Speaker 1

It does not take 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a clean starting point.

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So it questions these conventional chronologies.

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It also moves beyond the usual focus in histories of 20th century Ukraine, which focus on Soviet nationalities policy, on the Holodomor, on resistance and dissent.

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These are all excellent studies.

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but you focus instead on institutions, on how power and resources were distributed, and on the economic and administrative structures which tied Kyiv to the regions in Ukraine.

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And you also move beyond the study of the republic versus the Soviet federal center.

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It's not just a book about Kyiv versus Moscow.

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You introduce a very powerful third actor.

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the regions, the oblasts.

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Could you tell us about what took you to this project?

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What inspired you to approach Ukraine's 20th century history from this angle?

00:03:20 Speaker 2

Thank you very much, Big, for your question, and thank you for your generous introduction.

00:03:25 Speaker 2

The idea for the book came gradually to me as I observed

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the Euromaidan in 2013, 2014, and the Russian invasion in 2014.

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At the time, I asked myself why Ukraine goes through these cycles of revolutions.

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Why every 10 years, essentially, there is a revolution in Ukraine.

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That was one question that I asked myself.

00:04:01 Speaker 2

Another question that I ask myself is why Ukraine is not authoritarian after all, right?

00:04:06 Speaker 2

Ukraine had been part of Russia since, well, for more than 300 years.

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Surely it must have picked up authoritarianism as its characteristic feature.

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It should have probably have become its characteristic feature, but it hasn't.

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And that was pretty clear by 2013 that Ukraine rejects authoritarianism.

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So I started reading and trying to understand, reading various literature and trying to answer it to this, find answer to these questions.

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And I came across one explanation, and it seemed to be a reasonable explanation, is that Ukraine has strong regions.

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And of course, then we look at when did strong regionalism come from the origins of regionalism.

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And

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1991, as a starting point, I rejected from the start for one simple reason.

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By then, I had my first book out.

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And my first book discussed the so-called the reform of the Savnarhoze.

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So it was the reform about the decentralization of economic administration in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death.

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And so

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In this book, and that was my PhD research, and what I discovered is that regions and regionalism as a phenomenon manifested quite strongly already, manifested quite strongly in Ukraine already in the 50s and 60s.

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So at that time, at this point in my thinking, I was asking myself, fine, so I know there was strong regionalism in Ukraine in the 50s, but

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Is it relevant in any way to the regionalism in the 1990s?

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And if it is, how did the regionalism survive the period between 1965, when, as you know, the Brezhnev's administration had re-centralized the economic administration?

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So how did this regionalism survive the Brezhnev era?

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That was one question.

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And then the second question was, why, where is the Khrushchev's reforms of the 50s, the beginning of the regionalism in Ukraine?

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And then I started digging, digging, digging.

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I found that, well, no.

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And that brought me to the chronological frame of my book.

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which starts in 1917 when first central administration in Ukraine had been formed, the Central Rada, the so-called Central Rada.

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So that was the idea for the book.

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A, to explain the continuity of regionalism, that regionalism did not appear in 1991, that it had stronger roots.

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But there was another reason.

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So we come back to the war and the invasion in 2014.

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The war in 2014 had shown the Russian invasion and Ukraine's resistance to that invasion in 2014 had shown that Ukraine is just different.

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This is something that was quite well understood or perceived or felt in Ukraine, but was not very well understood in the West.

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From the perspective of Western scholars and observers at the time, so we are talking 2014, the differences between Russia and Ukraine were not sufficiently staggering to provoke such a resistance.

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And while the reasons

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of why Ukraine refused to fall back under Russia's orbit in 2014 were numerous.

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What I've decided to do is to explain in very detail just what makes Ukraine different from Russia, but also to explain how did it happen, that behind the facade of, quote, unquote, the same or, quote, unquote.

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not that different.

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Ukraine was different from Russia, and not just from a cultural or historical perspective, but from the perspective of institutional design.

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So to sum up, the idea behind the book, for the book, was twofold.

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One, purely historical,

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to show that the phenomenon of regionalism has very strong historical roots and explain how and why.

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And the second why is to show to the Western observer in public that the differences between Russia and Ukraine are much deeper than the eye meets.

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Natalia, I really wanted to know a little bit more about how

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you envisage the role of Kyiv and especially the Communist Party of Ukraine Central Committee during the 20th century.

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You really emphasize in the book that Kyiv never really controlled the Ukrainian Republic's resources.

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And you describe this position as one of, and I quote, responsibility without power.

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Can you unpack that for us?

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What role did the CPUs of Communist Party of Ukraine Central Committee actually play inside this system?

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What does it mean to have responsibility without power?

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The responsibility without power.

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Essentially, power meant the ability

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to enforce your own policy or to enforce your own decision.

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The problem is this, Kyiv never had policy-making power and it had limited decision-making power, but it did not control resources because resources had been controlled, financial and material supplies had been controlled by the central ministries because the entire economy was controlled by the

00:10:55 Speaker 2

by the central Soviet ministries, which were in Moscow.

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So what the Ukrainian leadership had found itself, the position the Ukrainian leadership had found itself since the 1970s, excuse me, since the 1920s, was that it essentially had to implement the policies that it did not devise.

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And it had to make sure that in order to implement this policy, the regions and the regional authorities had the resources which Kyiv did not control.

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And yet at the same time, the central leadership held Kyiv for implementing these policies.



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So essentially they were held, the Kyiv was held responsible for implementing the policies it did not.

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device and for resources it could not control.

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So this is what I mean by responsibility without power.

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And you mentioned that this has very clear relevance for understanding the challenges facing the government in Kyiv today.

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Could you elaborate a little on that?

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Yes, well, that requires a slightly longer monologue on my part.

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The thing is, what happened in the Soviet system is that despite the limitations that were imposed on the Republican organs, Republican authorities, despite the formal limitations, let's put it this way, the Republican authorities had some informal power.

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And as the Soviet Union collapsed, the weak formal institutions, well, they

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remained weak.

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But because there was vacuum in power relations between and I talk in my in my book about the regional central Ukrainian institutions and regional institutions.

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So when the Soviet Union collapsed and the formal institutions collapsed, informality took over.

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So we are having today Ukraine has a very

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has a very distinct institutional characteristic, whereby formal institutions remain weak, yet informal institutions remain strong.

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Now, it is formal institutions that hold, let's say, regional authorities responsible for implementing the policies.

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And these formal institutions are weak.

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They do not empower the regions.

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However, the regions hold quite strong informal powers.

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So while formally, the power, while formal institutions essentially do not enforce, do not empower the regions, formal and informal institutions do empower the regions.

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that creates this balance, right?

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That creates this balance in the communication, in the relationship between the central power and the regional power.

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So coming back to your question, I'd say that

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Today I see that, yes, that formal institutions do not empower the regions sufficiently, and which also means that formal institutions do not hold regions to responsibility as well.

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So well, it's the way I see it.

00:14:57 Speaker 1

Could you give us an example of what you mean by an informal institution?

00:15:01 Speaker 2

Informal institutions, patronalism, when somebody is, when a boss, let's say a boss, is employing someone based on his or her loyalty rather than, rather than qualification.

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For example, if

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an appointment to a post requires an open competition, and yet this competition is held.

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And yet it turns out that it was just a charade because essentially the person appointed to that post was appointed because those who

00:15:52 Speaker 2

Could they influence the appointment based on some personal criteria, but not the criteria?

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So because the formal institutional structure does not map onto the actually existing power relations and control of resources, the importance of these informal practices, including patronalism, increases.

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Yes, I'd say yes.

00:16:22 Speaker 1

Returning to the more historical aspects of your work, one of the threads running through your book is the difference between industrial and agricultural regions.

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Did Kyiv have more control over agriculture than over industry?

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And what did this unevenness mean for how the Ukrainian state evolved?

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I would not necessarily say that

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Ukraine had more, the Ukrainian leadership had more control over the agricultural regions.

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What I would say, though, is that the Ukrainian leadership had less control over the industrial regions.

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And it's all...

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I see.

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Well, we are not comparing like strong and weak, we are comparing weak and weaker.

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or strong and stronger, but in that case was weak and weaker.

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It all came down to control over resources.

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Resources were distributed by Moscow.

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Much of the performance of the agricultural oblasts dependent

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depended on the ability of the UPCOM secretaries to coordinate the so-called, to coordinate the relationship between the industrial enterprises who were quite heavily involved in helping Kalhoze and these Kalhoze.

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How much influence the Ukrainian leadership had over that process, I don't think that much.

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Because at the end of the day, it was down to the Oblast Secretary to organize that help.

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And then, of course, industrial enterprises, they received their funding directly from Moscow in the materials.

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Yeah.

00:18:42 Speaker 1

It's I found fascinating that the first chapters of your book that trace this story of strong regions, weak center all the way back to 1917.

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But in the discussion today, I wanted to focus a little bit on the second-half of the of the 20th century.

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You've already mentioned the Sovnar Host reform.

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For our listeners who might not be familiar with this term, this was

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a reform introduced under Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor in the 1950s and the 1960s, which entailed the creation of so-called Sovnar Hose, or regional economic councils.

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Over 100 such regional economic councils were created across the Soviet Union.

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I believe about 11 of those existed in Ukraine.

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And this was an attempt to

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challenged the power of central industrial ministries in Moscow, so these ministries were dismantled.

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Economic decision-making and management was devolved to these regional councils, and the reform was then reversed in the mid-1960s.

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Natalia, you argue in your book that the Sovnar Khos reform or the Regional Economic Council reform was the first real expansion of Republican authorities since

00:20:07 Speaker 1

The 1920s.

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How significant was this?

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How significant was the Sovnar Host reform for Ukraine in the 1950s and the 1960s?

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Yeah, yes.

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Thank you.

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Kind of banal by saying that it was very significant.

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Why?

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Because until then.

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Ukraine, the Ukrainian economy was run along the branches, economic branches.

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So the metallurgy was run directly from Moscow, and then the coal industry was run directly from Moscow, et cetera, et cetera, right?

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All industries were run from Moscow.

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Ukraine was not a single economic complex.

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The reform

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created a setting that allowed Ukraine to actually see, to see its economy as one and to try to function as one.

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They tried, but well, could not

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at the end, but because the reform was reversed and anyway, there was enough centralized control over the economy, enough centralized control over the economy remained for Ukraine not to become a single economic complex.

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Yet it tried.

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And that it tried.

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It saw the Ukrainian leadership could see advantages and disadvantages.

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It also of

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of the Ukrainian economic complex.

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But then, yes, in the mid-60s, it was reversed.

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So the reform, I'd say, did not run its full course.

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As for the significance, I think it had quite a strong effect on the way the Ukrainian leadership behaved in the 90s.

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Because many of those who participated in this reform, they were young bureaucrats at the time, many of them were very wary of separating from the Russian economic complex.

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They just understood very well the level of the integration of the Ukrainian economy into the Russian economy, or the whole union economy to be more

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correct, just it would be more correct to say.

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One of them was Vitaly Mosul.

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He was very careful about separating Ukraine from Russia.

00:23:03 Speaker 2

Exactly because they've already in the 60s, they in the 50s, 60s, the Ukrainian leadership saw that it's not that simple.

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So it's more the failure of the reform that produces this cautiousness in the 1990s.

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than maybe not.

00:23:23 Speaker 2

Well, it's hard to say whether it was quite the failure of the reform.

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The reform was designed in Moscow with certain, it had certain tasks.

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And these, so Moscow, I'd say, achieved certain tasks because the reform essentially was designed to boost economic growth.

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And for a while, it did.

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It did boost.

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economic growth, it was just not sustainable.

00:23:46 Speaker 2

But that's a different story and different factors also were in play.

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Natalia, you describe how the regional councils created in the 1950s started prioritizing local needs, building houses, schools, roads, sometimes to the detriment of sticking to the central plan.

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Yes.

00:24:07 Speaker 1

Was this an early glimpse of how regional power could both strengthen and fragment the state?

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Yes, I would say we could argue that.

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We should, but we should keep in mind that the regional authorities, everything they did, it's not because they intended to fragment power.

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It's the incentive structure

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that the Soviet institutions designed and imposed on the regional authorities, essentially made those decisions.

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Yeah.

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Fast forward to the 1970s and the 1980s, when Volodymyr Sterbytskyi, the first secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine, dominated Ukrainian politics, or maybe he didn't, as you suggest in your book.

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He is often remembered, and for good reason, as Brezhnev's loyal ally, a conservative, perhaps even a symbol of stagnation.

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He's associated with policies of Russification in Ukraine.

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But you show another side that by the late 1980s, under pressure from Perestroika and Glasnoys, Sterevitsky called for greater Republican autonomy.

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But someone like Shcherboski did that in 1988 really is striking.

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How do you explain this shift?

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I'd say there were two factors in play.

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One was Gorbachev was anyway already working on decentralization of economic administration, not in terms of the Somnakov's reform, but

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in terms of power in the republics.

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If I remember right, I should remember it right with apologies.

00:26:01 Speaker 2

I haven't read my book for a while.

00:26:04 Speaker 2

He was preparing a Congress on the new federal relations.

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And I suspect, I haven't found a documentary, a document confirming this, but I suspect that Shobitsky

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He knew that such a klanomo Congress was upcoming, and he wanted to, he was quite in line with the general Soviet policy.

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That was one factor that emboldened Shcherbitsky to make, to draft such a drastic proposal as he did at the end of 1988.

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But the other thing was, he was, so there was an incentive from above, let's put it this way.

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But he had also strong incentive coming from below, so coming from the oblast in the .

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It started to be felt in the regions.

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1988, in the process, the democratization started creeping in.

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And

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the economic hardships began to manifest, and the bureaucracy, the Ukrainian apparatus, understood, began feeling that Moscow was not quite coping with the economic administration.

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It was still

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a long way to go to the conditional, to the state of 1990, 1991, when Moscow completely loses control over the economy.

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But in 1988, the regions began feeling that the economy was not functioning as well, as smoothly, let's put it this way, not well, but smoothly, as before.

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What they believed

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was that if the decentralization, if Moscow decentralized economic administration, they'd be able to control the situation in the regions, that is, they would be able to avoid an economic crisis.

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or an economic slowdown, let's put it this way, they would be able to control the process of democratization and their position against communists growing.

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So I think Shcherbitsky began, well, he began receiving reports from the regions arguing for decentralization.

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Of course, Shcherbitsky could not imagine.

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he would not agree to decentralize power quite to the level of the regions.

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But it was, in a way, an opportunity to redefine Kyiv's relationship with the regions.

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Yes, but he, I think, Shcherbitsky aimed to redefine the relationship, not with the regions, but with Moscow.

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I see.

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He, I think he hoped to amass as much power as possible

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from Moscow in order to impose power over the regions, which is not quite what the regions wanted.

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The regions wanted to go, the regions envisioned to model more alike to the Semnakov reform.

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Yes.

00:29:41 Speaker 2

Yeah, that they'd be more empowered, that they'll get decision-making, more decision-making power.

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In my reading of that chapter in your book, it's that differing understanding of what the reform is about.

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So Sherebytsky, who wants to empower Kyiv vis-a-vis Moscow and the regions that want to have a more formalized relationship with Kyiv, is maybe one of the reasons why this opportunity to create a more

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functional, formal system regulating Kiev's relationship with the regions is missed because Kiev and the regions have a very different understanding of what Perestroika or Perupudova in Ukrainian is about.

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Well, I agree.

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Essentially, essentially, the last years of the Soviet Union were the years when the regions wanted, as you said, to redefine, to formalize and redefine

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the power sharing between all levels of power, the central, the Republican, and regionals, they wanted more clarity.

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And among other things, they wanted more, it clearly spelled responsibility.

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One motive, one kind of theme that goes through

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all documents that I looked, that I consulted for this period was utter irresponsibility of the central agencies for their decisions.

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And yet the leadership held the regions responsible for whatever was happening.

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So this essential unfairness and how the responsibilities were defined

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and formalized or non-formalized.

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Well, this was the main problem that the main issue that the regions wanted Perestroika or Perobodova to address.

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And this is what Neither Shcherbitsky, well, Shcherbitsky, actually, he did want more formalization.

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It's the Moscow agencies, the central agencies, essentially.

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were not interested in holding themselves to responsibility.

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And this is where it echoes the contemporary Ukrainian system, this lack of clearly spelled out responsibility for your policy, for the policy or the decision that an institution makes.

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It is striking that as the Soviet Union collapsed,

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the regions actually became stronger.

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Why did attempts to recentralize control, whether in 1991 or later, end up failing?

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And more broadly, is this weak center, strong region structure still resilient today?

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It's an excellent, excellent, excellent questions, Big.

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why Ukraine failed to consolidate the central power.

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I think because, well, first of all, had Kyiv been a strong power, it would be easier for the Kyiv authority, the central Ukrainian authorities, to reestablish power.

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over the regions.

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We shouldn't forget that regionalism was strong in Russia as well, right?

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Except in the 90s, but what happened is in Russia, the Russian leadership had what to return to.

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So Moscow was a strong center, and the Russian leadership had something to revert to.

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In Ukraine, the Ukrainian leadership was never strong, so it had nothing to revert to.

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In other words, there was no institutional continuity in Ukraine in terms of strong central leadership.

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Why it failed later?

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My understanding is that in the '90s, because of strong regions,

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So Ukraine starts its independence with regions stronger than the central power in Ukraine.

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And there was this demand, both at the institutional level, but also popular level, at the level of society to build a democratic state.

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And I suspect the reason the Ukrainian leadership

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failed to amass power is because it's it confused and began to confuse in the 90s and I'd argue it still continues to confuse two things is which is it began it confused strong state with authoritarianism.

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It decided the Ukrainian leadership believed

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in the 90s and continues, I think, to believe that a strong state means authoritarian.

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And it just can't figure out how to make a strong, how to, or doesn't want to, I don't know whether are we into the political will explanation or an institutional explanation.

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But the Ukrainian state struggles to figure out how to consolidate a democratic state.

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And so this is what we see with the attempts of President Kuchma when he had these manifestations of authoritarianism, right?

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Essentially, he tried to consolidate the state, but he was doing it by means of authoritarianism.

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And then the same was repeated by Yanukovich.

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And Ukraine just rejects.

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It just cannot.

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because of strong regions.



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The trick for Ukraine is, of course, to turn this energy from, to turn, to make strong regions work towards consolidating the Ukrainian democratic state.

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So that brings us to the present.

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If, as you show, regional autonomy was part of what protected Ukraine from authoritarianism,

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And if the system of strong regions and a weak center is so deeply rooted, is it actually desirable to change it?

00:36:58 Speaker 2

I'd say I'd rather see the Ukrainian centralized power stronger, the Ukrainians stay stronger rather than the regions weaker.

00:37:08 Speaker 2

Let me put it this way.

00:37:11 Speaker 1

And I realize it's a huge question, but what do you think that would entail?

00:37:14 Speaker 1

to strengthen the center without weakening the region.

00:37:17 Speaker 2

Ukraine needs to work on, it has to improve, let's put it this way, it's an institutional system and there are very many elements to that.

00:37:29 Speaker 2

Because all policies like taxation or the judicial reform,

00:37:38 Speaker 2

all have to work towards finding this correct balance between the regions and the center.

00:37:45 Speaker 2

Also, the state has to work on finding a correct balance between formal and informal institutions.

00:37:54 Speaker 2

Patronalism and neo-patrimonialism, the neo-patrimonial system, has to become slightly weaker, let's put it this way, well, weaker, to formally

00:38:08 Speaker 2

Formal institutions have to become stronger.

00:38:14 Speaker 2

Accountability of all power holders has to be formalized and well, the rule of law, we are coming down to the rule of law.

00:38:28 Speaker 1

So reforming the system in a way that strengthens the center without weakening the regions.

00:38:33 Speaker 2

Yes.

00:38:34 Speaker 1

The challenges.

00:38:38 Speaker 1

The main challenge is patronalism.

00:38:41 Speaker 1

That's what I think was at least one of the takeaways I got from the workshop we organized as part of the Oxford Ukraine Hub.

00:38:47 Speaker 1

Natalia, in your conclusion, you write that behind the facade of Soviet authoritarianism, a system incompatible with it was conceived and matured, which is a powerful line, which sums up a lot of the strands of our conversation today.

00:39:08 Speaker 1

Could you unpack this for us as a way of conclusion?

00:39:14 Speaker 2

As a way of conclusion, I'd say that when the Soviet system was designed, and we are going back to the 1920s, the Soviet leadership did not imagine that system

00:39:37 Speaker 2

would empower the regions.

00:39:41 Speaker 2

They did not, the Soviet leadership, designed that system with the intent to make the regional, the Republican authorities weak.

00:39:53 Speaker 2

But it did not design it with the view of making the region strong.

00:40:01 Speaker 2

And what, 70 years later, look where it

00:40:05 Speaker 2

where it brought, what it gave, right?

00:40:08 Speaker 2

What the results are.

00:40:11 Speaker 2

My point is that today when the reforms are written and when the institutional changes are made, a very careful attention has to be paid to unintended outcomes.

00:40:29 Speaker 2

So that's essentially the message of the book.

00:40:34 Speaker 1

Natalia, thank you so much for this conversation.

00:40:36 Speaker 1

It's been illuminating.

00:40:38 Speaker 1

Your book is essential reading for anyone interested in 20th century Ukrainian history, anyone interested in the opportunities and challenges for state consolidation in Ukraine today and more broadly for historians of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, you provide a refreshing take

00:40:58 Speaker 1

on the institutional and economic history of state socialism and early post-Soviet capitalism.

00:41:05 Speaker 1

This is a very important book, which I recommend wholeheartedly.

00:41:09 Speaker 1

For our listeners, Natalia's book is entitled The Institutional Foundations of Ukrainian Democracy: Power Sharing, Regionalism, and Authoritarianism.

00:41:18 Speaker 1

It was published by Oxford University Press in 2024, and you can find links in the episode description.

00:41:26 Speaker 1

Natalia, thank you so much for joining us today.

00:41:28 Speaker 1

It's been a pleasure.

00:41:30 Speaker 2

Thank you, Zbig.

00:41:31 Speaker 2

Thank you so much for having me.

00:41:33 Speaker 2

It is, I must say, it is an honor to be interviewed by you and to have my first book, first conversation about my book at Oxford.

00:41:48 Speaker 1

It's a real pleasure, and the book has been

00:41:54 Speaker 1

very important in shaping my thinking about, especially in terms of my own research interests, the history of Perestroika in the 1990s, which is something that I am very much pursuing myself now.

00:42:09 Speaker 1

So thank you.

00:42:09 Speaker 1

It's been an honor for me too.

00:42:13 Speaker 1

To our listeners, this podcast is brought to you by the Oxford Ukraine Hub, an interdisciplinary network connecting expertise across Oxford University with

00:42:23 Speaker 1

international researchers and practitioners working on Ukraine-related issues.

00:42:28 Speaker 1

Thank you very much for listening.

00:42:30 Speaker 1

I'm speaking of Voinovsky.

00:42:32 Speaker 1

If you want to know more about the Oxford Ukraine Hub, please visit our website.

00:42:37 Speaker 1

Thank you.