

Panel One 9:10-11:10AM

Knowledge and the Making of the Ukrainian State after Independence

Nataliya Kibita

In the final years of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian Soviet elites at both the republican and regional levels discussed decentralization as a mechanism for coping with the ongoing crisis. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this discussion continued but yielded no practical results. Due to a lack of clear understanding of the causes of the Soviet collapse and inadequate knowledge of the Ukrainian institutional system, President Leonid Kravchuk chose to implement a Russian-style authoritarian model of governance, relying on the administrative vertical of presidential representatives in the regions. In this paper, I argue that authoritarianism was inadequate for Ukraine in the 1990s (or ever since then). I emphasize the importance of regionalism in state-building and contend that the 1990s represented a missed opportunity for decentralization reform, which was only implemented in 2014 under pressure from the Russian invasion. Had decentralization reform been implemented in the 1990s, while the new system was taking shape, it could have enabled state consolidation from the bottom up and ultimately led to a strong state.

Ukraine's Nuclear Disarmament and the Global Nuclear Order

Mariana Budjeryn

In 1991, as Ukraine gained its independence, it found itself thrust into the realm of “big” international politics – nuclear arms control and disarmament. The collapsed Soviet Union left on Ukraine’s territory a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons, as well as the scientific and industrial infrastructure that formerly contributed to Soviet military-strategic programs. Negotiations of the fate of these nuclear armaments came to dominate Ukraine’s foreign policy engagements for the following three years until the end of 1994, when Ukraine joined the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapon state, pledging to relinquish its nuclear inheritance in exchange for security assurances from the nuclear powers, including Russia and the United States. The presentation examines Ukraine’s deliberations of its nuclear choices as constitutive of the construction of its national security narrative and the outward-facing sovereign identity. Ultimately, Ukraine’s nuclear choices were shaped by how Ukraine ventured to reconcile its emergent security and national identity with the structure and grammar of the global nuclear order, which Ukraine, aspiring to be an international citizen in good standing, chose not to defy. This is precisely the order that would fail Ukraine two decades later, in the wake of the Russian aggression.

Between Independence and Indigeneity: Ukraine's Debate over Crimean Tatar Recognition

Greta Uehling

The government of Ukraine has recently made notable progress in recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples, a significant departure from earlier state policy. For more than two decades after independence, Ukraine resisted recognizing Indigenous status and rights, abstaining from votes on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and failing to implement domestic protections for the Crimean Tatars. International bodies, including the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, repeatedly expressed concern over discrimination in land rights, employment, education, and political representation while Ukrainian authorities classified Crimean Tatars as a “minority,” perpetuating structural inequities rooted in the Soviet-era.

These policies had profound social and environmental consequences. Denied access to ancestral lands and citizenship documentation, Crimean Tatars faced joblessness, poverty, and ethnic and religious discrimination. Ukraine’s post-independence land reforms privileged ethnic Russian and Ukrainians, effectively excluding the previously deported population from rightful access to land and resources.

Today, Ukraine’s recognition of the Crimean Tatars as Indigenous, President Zelenskyy’s proactive approach, and the creation of both a Permanent Representative of the President in Crimea and a Crimea Platform signal new possibilities for justice. Yet these steps also pose a test of Ukraine’s decolonizing ambitions: will Indigenous rights be meaningfully restored, or instrumentalized for geopolitical ends? The future of Crimean Tatar self-determination—and the integrity of Ukraine’s transformation—may depend on how this question is answered.