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Assistant Professor, Dept. of  
Geography, Murarka College,  
Sultanganj TMBU, Bhagalpur  
Email: [rkrakrak05@gmail.com](mailto:rkrakrak05@gmail.com)

**Address for correspondence:**  
Rakesh Kumar  
Assistant Professor, Dept. of  
Geography, Murarka College,  
Sultanganj TMBU, Bhagalpur  
Email: [rkrakrak05@gmail.com](mailto:rkrakrak05@gmail.com)

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# Regional Inequalities in Ukraine: Historical, Cultural, and Political Dimensions

Rakesh Kumar

## Abstract

Ukraine is characterized by serious and persistent regional disparities which become manifest in the sophisticatedly structured cultural, historical, and political geography of the country. This paper seeks to investigate in some detail the complex social, economic, and infrastructural discrepancies that now exist between western Ukraine and eastern Ukraine. These discrepancies in their respective conditions place them in an even more marked historical progression. But the abiding influences of the various imperial legacies involve this progression. For while on the one hand the Austro-Hungarian Empire fostered closer institutional and cultural bonds with Central Europe and developed an agrarian economy with houses of business in the main, on the other the Russian Empire exercised an influence over the eastern region. The intensive Soviet industrialisation policy which occasioned the development of the great centres of metallurgy, mining, and heavy industries knit this region closely into the economic and political fabric of Sovietism. These inherited dualisms wrongly have been aggravated and complicated by the post-independence upheavals. The thesis of this article is based on a critical review of the secondary literature and of salient statistical data. The spatial analysis formulated here leads to the conclusion that the regional disparities in Ukraine are very much more than mere developmental divergencies in the development of the various infrastructures, or the level of economic production. It is maintained that the regional inequalities in Ukraine are deeply ingrained in the national geopolitical structure and the different cultural attitudes which it elicits, as evidenced in the linguistic divergencies, the variations of religious allegiances and the political appetites. These attitudes to political direction are directly related to these deeper inequalities. They also present serious difficulties to national unity and social cohesion, and critically affect the prospects of the formulation of a strong national integration in the terms of a nationalised and unified Ukraine.

**Keywords:** Regional Inequality, Ukraine, Historical, Political, Cultural, Economic Disparities, Social Inequality.

## Introduction

The regional inequality characterizing the geography of Ukraine is a severe contrast between the east—industrialized—and the west—agro-culturally European. This contrast, constantly referred to in the academic and political literature, has been increasingly politicized since independence in 1991; it has helped to influence the outcomes of election results, the plans for economic reconstruction, and has given rise to varying cultural identities. In the present article we raise the central question of research: How do differing conditions, economic, social, and structural, prevalent in western and eastern Ukraine reveal the complex past and cultural and political geography of this country? It is the aim of the present inquiry to investigate these divergences in the light of the spatial and historical background, in furtherance of a better understanding of these difficult problems of regional development so prominent in Ukraine, and so full of social-political implications. It should be noted, however, that the east-west division is not a simple one, and here also we must be on our guard against overlooking the effects of regional differences which we may discover operating, as well as national trends. While the regions have their distinct characteristics, they are not undynamic; and in Ukraine since independence, we have had notable changes and effective attempts of national integration combating the labour of trying to place them in the terms of simple regional divisions. The danger of placing our attention entirely upon an east-west division of Ukraine is that we shall come to overlook other important features which characterize regional differences, i.e., those which exist between possible large urban centres and country, or those which might be discovered in the regions and not expressible in terms of the east-west division. The attention should be possible to extend, therefore, beyond the east-west division, in a search for the essential characteristics that are met with in noticing the various complexities of regional industrial development; and likewise, may be included various registers of economic, political and social-cultural significance (Liu et al., 2024).

### **Historical and Cultural Roots of Regional Disparities**

The historic divides in Ukraine result from the legacy of empires. Western Ukraine, previously under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had intertwining cultural, religious, and institutional ties with Central Europe which had produced a rural economy centred on small-scale farming and a strong sense of national identity (Katchanovski, 2006). However, the eastern part of Ukraine had been under the Russian Empire and subsequently had a very high degree of industrialization, especially during the Soviet period. The economy and cities grew up with mining, metallurgy, and large centres, which attached to the Soviet economic and political system (Davis, 2023). It is now pertinent to observe that this east-west dichotomy is not universal and can obscure intra-regional varieties of economic and social change in the country as well as national trends. The regional characteristics are different, but they are not static, while a new post-independence Ukraine has undergone processes of rather vibrant change and effort at integration which present very difficult problems of regional classification. Concentration on the east-west split will not leave room for the consideration of other important regional divisions in Ukraine, such as the ones between big urban centres and rural peripheries, or intra-regional differences which may not conform to the defined east-west axis. The analytical focus should, then, be one that goes beyond the east-west binary and enables analysis of the complex dimensions of regional inequalities which exist, such as social, political, and cultural factors. It has been stated that the application of models using the East-West paradigm seriously obscures the histories, linguistic wealth, economic decadences, and political changes through which Ukrainian society has evolved which are impressive in their diversity (Penkala et al., 2020). Eastern and western Ukraine underwent a process of Soviet industrialization which consolidated these differences in the two regions. Various important industrial cities of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, developed as major centres of heavy industry, which created great demand for labour and capital. The western territories of Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, had developed a less industrialised pattern but displayed distinctive cultural attributes, especially through their specific forms of Ukrainian linguistic and religious heritage (Malanchuk, 2006). These historical characteristics possess a explanation for the economic and cultural differences which exist even today. However, it is also important to acknowledge that this east-west dichotomy is not monolithic and can obscure intra-regional variations and overriding national trends. Although these regional characteristics are distinct, they are not static. Post-independence Ukraine has seen some considerably dynamic shifts and attempts at national integration, which are factors which would seem to negate the simplistic characterisations of regional entities. An exclusive concern with the east-west divide may then take as read the existence of other significant regional divisions in Ukraine, such as the differences between large urban centres and rural peripheries, or internal differences within regions, which do not conform to the broadly defined east-west axis. Hence, the analytical criterion applied should be one not confined to the binary, but which has a connotation of the many-sidedness of the phenomena in edited candidate pages which relate to regional inequality, differentials in socio-economics, politics, and culture (Malanchuk, 2005). The degree of Russification of a region in Ukraine has an important role to play, along with the employment of industrialized outlets, which has a direct effect on the shapes of variations presented amongst public opinion over the country.

### **Economic Disparities**

Ukraine's economy shows a stark contrast in geography, where the eastern parts have historically contributed disproportionate shares of industrial activity, especially in steel, coal, and machinery (Huk & Zeynalov, 2022). Even rid of Soviet times, the concentration of industry was high in the regions of Donbas and Kharkiv. However, the collapse of the Soviet types of industry and the ongoing war has weakened the economic solidness of East-Ukraine (Ramos & Kovalenko, 2016). Although these contrasts are important, it is very important to realize that it has directed itself into recently diversifications of the east's economy. Likewise, still certain western regions have considerable economic problems, thus creating a more extensive economic picture than a straight east-west di-vide. The western regions have historically been dependent upon exporting products with smaller value deprivation, cereals, timber, whereas the Donbas region has historically been mainly engaged in exporting the products such as the steel and machinery which have more value-addition (Lima, 2024). The western Ukraine, despite its lower industrialization, has profited extensively of even more advantages, when the integration into the European territories has happened. This integration has become clear on the account of better trust in external trade to Poland, increasing labour emigration into EU-countries and the growth of the IT- and service sectors in the towns of Lviv, and improved diversification of the regional economy (Lazhnik et al. 2020). The east-west difference manifests clearly as an uneven economic geography, where industrial decrease in the east shows a contrast with adaptable, service-dominated, similar growth in the west (Huk & Zeynalov, 2022). It is, however, also important to be emphasized that the in the last years a diversification of the eastern economy has been attempted and that the economic problem is still certain on the western parts which indicates that the economic situation is going to be apparent of a more extensive character, than a simple east-west divide creates. The economical difference is also when different conditions of external relations, where the asymmetry in the external integration between ethno-regions creates local destruction of the national unity (Shulman, 1999). These economical differences represent in very many cases differences also as for geopolitical conditions tells the electoral movements about, whether the eastern regions in Ukraine have in the historical times felt more inclined to the parties, who have had a closer tie, belonging to Russia, wherein the western regions have moved more to pro-European parties (Katchanovski, 2014).

## **Social Inequalities**

Social differences mirror economic differences. Things like income, employment level, and education are different in east and west. Places in western Ukraine have had a greater migration outflow of labour from the country, and so become the subject of remittance driven local economies. In contrast, eastern Ukraine depends on industrial jobs, subjecting itself to shocks in the economy and lack of employment (Fàrynà et al., 2021). However, one must realize that this east west dichotomy is not monolithic and can disguise intra-regional variation and national trends. Likewise, the effects of plagues of the past four years have had their toll on local labour markets, especially in the eastern areas, which have resulted in business flight, and underproduction resulting from supply chain restrictions and war grief (Fàrynà et al, 2021).

The differences in educational and cultural institutions are also marked. Western Ukraine has been the center for education in the Ukrainian language, a center for its literature and the religious institutions of its citizens, a bulwark to that cultural identity. Eastern Ukraine, subject to a greater reliance on Russification by its rulers, reflect to a greater extent bilingual or Russified social landscapes. These social differences serve to give divergent political orientations to the regions.

But there are analyses which show that this seeming divide is not a rigid one, and that there are wider national experiences and aspirations that have come down to these regions, and that might transcend linguistic and cultural differences, portending a greater national unity especially evidenced in the region when under attack from without (Bilaniuk & Melnyk, 2008). The complicating factors of these experiences are all subject to nuance, and some studies have shown these historical differences about ethnicities, and language distribution in national territories in Ukraine are inextricably tied to various divergent viewpoints of respective nationalities (Lima, 2024).

## **Infrastructural Disparities**

The development of infrastructure highlights yet another layer of inequality. The Soviet focus of investment was on industrial and urban infrastructure in the east, while rural areas in the west of the country are less developed. Investment since independence has not then been uniform, with EU-sponsored projects increasing funding in border regions of the west, while the infrastructure in the region of Donbas has been severely damaged by the conflict (Mulyk, 2021). However, it is also worth noting here that attempts have been made in recent years to diversify the eastern economy, and that certain areas in the west of the country also suffer considerable economic ills, indicating that the infrastructure situation is more complex than a mere east-west divide in terms of economic prosperity would suggest. Moreover, the regional differences in Ukraine are not merely economic, but are also political and cultural, affecting the development of the country (Himka, 2015).

Transportation systems illustrate this difference: eastern Ukraine developed extensive rail and road systems for the export of its industries, whereas western Ukraine is increasingly matching its transport systems with the European trading systems. Energy infrastructure again starkly demonstrates these geopolitical problems, since the east relies on antiquated Soviet grids, while the western areas of the country are increasingly integrated into the European energy systems (Sardak et al., 2019). These differences in infrastructure, coupled with economic and social cleavages, have in the past brought about divergent political orientations and regional identities in the country (Lima, 2024).

## **Political Geography and Regional Divides**

These disparities exist within an overarching political-geographical context. Voter patterns show a clear west-east divide with western regions supporting pro-European, reformist candidates, and eastern regions historically supporting pro-Russian parties. This is indicative of not only political preferences, but also the socio-economic and cultural geographies created through history (Katchanovski, 2006). However, the political map is not entirely unchanging and although historically low (in the East and South) in the 2014 elections, the growth of ethno-centred national forms of identity blurs the distinction between “ethnic Ukrainian” and “citizen of Ukraine” (Shmidt and Jaworsky, 2022) (Chaisty and Whitefield, 2018).

The war has further increased inequities since 2014. The conflict has wreaked havoc with industrial production in the east, caused dislocation of populations, and increased infrastructural gaps. Simultaneously, the economic structure of western Ukraine has made it a focus for internally displaced persons and EU projects designed to aid western Ukraine leading to further divergence in development (Kozyreva, et al., 2017). This ongoing divergence puts even more emphasis on the urgent need for any national strategy to address the clear differentiation of needs and opportunities present in these two regions, and rather than increased divergences some form of all-embracing nationally coherent plan needs to be followed (Huk and Zeynalov, 2022).

## **Discussion**

The differences between western and eastern Ukraine do not represent purely economic and infrastructural gaps. These disparities are connected to historical and cultural problems that condition political orientations and social identities. Thus, the question is how to resolve the problem of inequality without entrenching divisions. Some argue that a unifying national identity is evolving in response to these differences, e.g., in relation to external dangers, which would dissipate the historical divide even further. Thus, policies taken for the advantages of balanced regional development, revitalization of infrastructural networks, and a genuine concern with the unification of cultural mores can not only be advantageous but are imperative for the minimization of inequalities and the furtherance of national cohesiveness. The Ukraine case is important

because it raises issues entertained in the broader political and cultural geography of the region, showing that regional inequalities are correlated with identity politics and geopolitical conflict, which in turn shape national narratives and political stability. But, as noted some analysis suggests that while regional inequalities are manifest, a unifying national identity is evolving in response to those inequalities, e.g., in connection with external dangers, which might serve to mitigate the historical divide even further.

### Conclusion

The regional inequalities of Ukraine reveal more than simply uneven development: they mask the historical, cultural, and political geography of the country. The European cultural attachments, agricultural development, and increased integration into EU economies of the western portion of the country contrast sharply with the industrial past and more pronounced Russified cultural features of the east, and its resulting vulnerability to conflict. To deal effectively with such deeply rooted inequalities requires not merely a variety of directed economic policies but a full acceptance of the cultural and political geographies that sustain them. Bridging the regional divides of Ukraine will thus not merely be useful but necessary for its future stability, integration, and long-term development. However, some analytical work supports the idea that this supposed divide is not absolute, and that the national experiences and aspirations can cut across the regional linguistic and cultural differences and show up a growing sense of national unity, particularly in respect to external threats. In this light there is the suggestion that while the regional inequalities are marked, a unifying national identity is coming into being and that this identity will help to smooth over the historical divides and in time lead to an increasing national cohesiveness.

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