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Ukrainian Political Economy: An Analysis of Past, Present, and Future Trends

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The modern political-economic conditions of Ukraine can be traced to its' independence in 1991. After 69 years as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, it became a free country and with that broke its status as an integral part of Russia (Delwaide 2011-2014, 179). Like the other former Soviet-Socialist Republics, Ukraine has had to weather the transition from an authoritarian command economy to a modern capitalist society. The economic and political system that existed under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union did not resemble an American style free-market economy backed by liberal democracy (CIA World Factbook 2021). The system that has replaced it is certainly not perfect and has a lot of room for improvement that could be achieved in the next 25 or so years. However, the most imminent and identifiable impediment to Ukrainian economic development and growth is the conflict in the east with Russia and its proxies. This started in February of 2014 after the overthrow of a pro-Russian president in the *Maidan* Revolution, which led to Russia's invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, and its incorporation into Russia, and the war in the east of the country (CIA World Factbook 2021). The result of this has been years of conflict that has stalemated. Given its' situational circumstances, Ukraine is very much a country that is stagnant in terms of economic development. While the 1990s saw significant drops in GDP per capita, contemporary Ukraine has not seen precipitous decline but no significant growth at the same time (World Bank 2021). Its Human Development Index (HDI) score of 0.779 in 2019 places it at a high level of development, even though an armed conflict is being conducted within its borders (UNDP 2021). This reality makes Ukraine an interesting case to study in terms of political economy, and there are many perspectives from which to analyze and draw conclusions. I will focus on the ongoing conflict and its' implications for Ukrainian political economy, offering my analysis and recommendations throughout the paper.

In beginning this analysis of Ukraine, a hypothetical will be posed. What if the United States post-independence established itself as a sovereign state, yet significant influence of Great Britain endured in the long term? That is what could be argued in the case of Ukraine and scholars have recognized it. In the prominent journal *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* Volodymyr Kravchenko states that the influence of history has a, ““Crucial role in shaping different patterns of post-communist economic, political, and cultural developments in Eastern Europe”” (2015-16, 447). The states that superseded the USSR needed to form national identities that would enable them to build themselves up, and history has been critical to this (Kravchenko 2015-16, 447-

448). Ukraine earned the moniker “Little Russia” and its citizens “Little Russians” and had the status as the second most important ethnicity among the many nationalities that were unified under the USSR, Russians being supreme (Kravchenko 2015-16, 450-451). The Ukrainian SSR was not really a nation-state, but a multi-ethnic state that was constructed within the territory that Ukraine now inhabits (Kravchenko 2015-16, 450). Kravchenko identifies three ethnic identifications in Soviet Ukraine: Soviet Russian, Little Russian, and Ukrainian, and this lack of a singular ethnic identity might almost be seen as the fulfillment of Soviet ideals (Kravchenko 2015-16, 451). From a religious perspective Kiev, the capital city of Ukraine, is historically an important city in the Orthodox Christian religion and which ties it to Russia (Kravchenko 2015-16, 451).

The historical relationship with Russia, built before and maintained during the Soviet, era carries on into the present. In 2014, President Vladimir Putin stated that Kiev is the “Mother of Russian Cities”, reiterating the importance that Ukraine has in the heart of Russian identity (Delwaide 2011-2014, 179). Russia itself moved into its post-Imperial phase in 1917 and its post-Soviet phase in 1991, and it too has had to form its own identity (Delwaide 2011-2014, 183). Ukraine as an independent state is anathema in a sense to some Russians, and certainly Putin, and its “loss” has been one of the toughest on the psyche of Imperial and Soviet-minded Russians (Delwaide 2011-2014, 183-184). Returning to the “Little Russia” dynamic, Russian nationalists do not really view Ukraine as its own nation but as merely an extension of Russia, and Ukrainian language as a Russian dialect, which it is most certainly not (Delwaide 2011-2014, 184).

Describing this dynamic from the perspective of Russia is important in analyzing the current conflict, and its consequences for Ukraine. This is because the conflict was really imposed from the outside by Russia without real provocation from Ukraine, if one assumes the *Maidan* revolution to be politically legitimate. From the perspective of Ukraine their relationship with Russia, which was the dominant Soviet republic, has not been perfect. One of the most cited examples is the Great Famine (Holodomor) in 1932 and 1933, considered a genocide by some, which killed over 3 million Ukrainians (Delwaide 2011-2014 187-188). The circumstances that led to the famine were created by Soviet agriculture policy imposed by the central government in Moscow (Delwaide 2011-2014, 187-188). The 1930s saw the return of Russian culture as a

major factor in unifying the Soviet republics, which were spread over thousands of miles and contained peoples that did not have much in common besides ties to Imperial and Soviet Russia (Delwaide 2011-2014, 189). The famine was followed up by World War II, the Holocaust, and forced deportations of people to Poland, which led to the decline of multiethnic Ukraine. The “Russification” of Ukraine, which involved the migration of Soviet citizens of other republics, also became a reality and led to the widespread use of Russian language. The demographic shift cannot be discounted, as Ukraine from 1933-1944 is believed to have lost 1/3rd of its population, estimated to be 25 million in 1946. However, the 1959 census put the population at 42 million, with an estimated 1/3rd of the 1990 population believed to have been born in different republics or descendants of these individuals (Delwaide 2011-2014, 189). The ethno-linguistic divide also plays a role in how Ukrainian history is discussed, with efforts to incorporate the Great Famine of the 1930s resisted by politicians in the more heavily Russian South and East (Delwaide 2011-2014, 194-195). In opinion polls taken in 2013 and 2014, 68% of Western Ukrainians supported European Union integration while only 21% of Easterners felt the same (Delwaide 2011-2014, 195). Disapproval of Stalin is also higher in the west (52%) than the center (30%), south (27%), and east (29%) (Delwaide 2011-2014, 195).

One could analyze the national and political dynamics in Ukraine in each decade of the Soviet Union’s existence and also discuss the Imperial-era, but this is neither feasible nor desirable. The information provided previously gives a snapshot of the greatest sociological shift that one must have knowledge of to understand the current situation in Ukraine. Currently, 30% of Ukrainians are estimated to speak Russian as their primary language versus 67% who speak Ukrainian (CIA World Factbook 2021). Of a population of nearly 44 million, Ethnic Russians account for 17.3% of Ukraine’s population while ethnic Ukrainians account for 77.8% (CIA World Factbook 2021). The Russian language has remained the favored language in everyday life as well as in media and challenges to the status quo have been opposed (Delwaide 2011-2014, 191-192) From this data, the legacy of the Soviet-era and Russian influence is clearer, and the current situation is put into context. From a political perspective President Putin himself recently said that, “Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus,” further promoting the Russian line about the relationship between the two countries (2021). (Delwaide 2011-2014, 195). Despite this support for separatism and secession by pro-Russian Ukrainians has been low country-wide, with the May 25, 2014 presidential election that occurred

post-Crimean invasion reiterating this (Delwaide 2011-2014, 195). The issue of language and ethnicity is one of the social factors that has played a role in Ukraine's evolution in the past 30 years, and it is one of the most salient and defining elements of its current situation. While scholars have different perspectives on the subject area, the breakdown of it given here sets the scene for what will be discussed further below.

Having discussed key historical factors that play a role in contemporary Ukrainian development, I now want to turn to economic, social, and political indicators. One of the first indicators drawn from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) that I use is tax revenue as a percentage of GDP. In 2019 tax revenue accounted for around 19.2% of GDP in Ukraine, while in 1999, the first-year data is available, it accounted for 12.99% of GDP (World Bank 2021). If one looks below at the chart shown in *Figure 1*, they can see a gradual rise in this indicator and that most of the comparison countries follow a similar trend, with tax revenue accounting for plus or minus 20% of GDP (World Bank 2021). These figures can be analyzed from a theoretical standpoint. Timothy Besley and Torsten Persson discuss different categories of countries in *Pillars of Prosperity* (2011). Within their concept, Ukraine could be considered a *redistributive state*, in that it possesses a modicum of fiscal capacity, and they can redistribute resources (Besley and Persson 2011, 14). One could largely draw this conclusion because they are currently in an armed conflict with Russia, however they show some signs of being in another of Besley and Persson's categories, a *common-interest state*, as they are actively invested in the defense of their territory for the benefit of their citizens (Besley and Persson 2011, 14). Were they to fall into the third category, *weak states*, they would also have redistributive qualities, but the instability of political institutions would be high and fiscal capacity building neglected (Besley and Persson 2011, 14).

One can also turn to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), shown in *Figure 2*, to understand the broader functioning of the Ukrainian State. Ukraine had a CPI of 33 in 2020, one of the highest among its peers in this comparison, versus 26 in 2012 (Transparency International 2021). In comparison, Latvians perceive a lower level of corruption with their CPI in 2020 being 57 versus 49 in 2012, showing that the experience of corruption in former soviet republics is not completely equal (Transparency International 2021). This tells us that Ukrainians believe that there is high level of corruption in their government and that it is

noticeable in their everyday lives. We can turn to theoretical conceptions to help understand the Ukraine case. North et al. discuss their conception of access orders in political economy, the two types being *open access orders* and *limited access orders* (2012, 1-2). *Open access orders* solve the issue of violence related to economic issues by having open access and competition in the economic sphere. *Limited access orders* on the other hand limit violence among competing economic actors by allocating rents, like government contracts, land, business monopolies etc. to placate them (North et al. 2012, 1-2). This latter type of access order creates peace within states; however, it is effectively a form of corruption and patronage. Popular discourse related to former soviet republics often references the emergence of *oligarchs* almost like “super businesspeople”, whose influence permeates all layers of society. Systems like this are great examples of what *limited access orders* look like in practice.

Viktoriya Palekhova discusses the impact that inequality has on economic growth, specifically in relation to Ruchir Sharma’s *10 Rules of Successful Nations* (2021, 34). Sharma discusses the idea of *good* and *bad* billionaires (Palekhova 2021, 35). The *bad billionaires*, under his conception, are engaged in “rent seeking industries” like mining, construction, real estate, and market speculation, which have a certain level of corruption to them. *Good billionaires* are classified as such because they are engaged in competitive industry, a precondition for an *open access* order, which leads to investments in industries that benefit economies like manufacturing, tech, and pharmaceuticals. Palekhova’s research indicates that the wealth of Ukrainian billionaires accounts for 5.32% of GDP and says that 100% of billionaires in Ukraine could be labeled bad. It is also suggested that the less oligarchy within a country, the greater there is a chance for economic growth. This suggests that Ukraine’s economic growth is partially inhibited because there is a large concentration of wealth, and with it political power, in the hands of a small group of people (Palekhova 2021, 35). If we take this information to be accurate, then it suggests that Ukraine can restrict violence in the economic sphere because it privileges certain individuals and entities. This would make it a *limited access order*, because there is an absence of economic competition within different sectors (North et al. 1-2). While the war in the east of the country demonstrates that there is still violent contention for power, Ukraine is still able to control violent contention within its’ territory.

The next WDI discussed is fertility rate. Ukraine has seen a decline in total births per woman, with the number standing at 1.228 in 2019 (World Bank 2021). If one looks at *Figure 3*, the number is steadily at 2 plus through much of the 1980s and begins to really drop in 1989 when the number goes to 1.92, a difference in .10 from the previous year. One could also look at another WDI, shown in *Figure 4*, age dependency ratio as a percentage of the working population, which in Ukraine is at 49.1% as of 2020. This number dropped during the 1990s and into the 2000s but began to rise again to about its current position around 2011 (World Bank 2021). This suggests that the population is declining which suggests that demographically, the country could see problems in the future. If Ukraine cannot maintain the population necessary to fill public and private sector positions, and has larger numbers of retirees, then I would expect it to see a higher strain on the economy.

In terms of Ukraine's current development, despite the war it had a score of 0.779 on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2021). This is on a scale of 0-1.0, and it indicates that Ukraine has a high level of development and quality of life. However, if one looks at *Figure 5* Ukraine had a HDI score of 0.725 in 1990 and 0.694 in 2000, before climbing back up to 0.755 in 2010. This shows that while Ukraine has a decent HDI score, it saw a decline during the 1990s and has not really been able to see significant gains. Take the case of Latvia, another former Soviet Republic. In 1990 it had an HDI score of 0.711, which rose to 0.735 in 2000 and 0.824 in 2010. As of 2019 Latvia's score is 0.866, which is higher than Ukraine's and places it in the "very high" level of development versus Ukraine's high status of development (UNDP 2021). If we look at GDP per capita there are also marked differences between Latvia and Ukraine. Ukraine's 2020 GDP per capita, shown in *Figure 6*, is \$12,377.02 while Latvia's was \$29,932.49, the highest of any of the countries that are compared to Ukraine (World Bank 2021). This matters because if it is assumed that all soviet republics, specifically those in Europe, started post-1991 in similar conditions, then one might expect all to have similar levels of contemporary development. Putting Latvia and Ukraine side-by-side reduces such presumptions and paints a more complicated picture. The deduction that can be made is that Latvia has benefitted from EU and NATO membership, both of which Ukraine is not a part of. When one looks back to the history that Ukraine and Russia share that has been, it is understandable why these ties have bound the countries in a deep way, unlike those with other former soviet republics.

The indicators and data that have been discussed above give a better picture of Ukraine's current economic, political, and social conditions. The use of the comparison countries that can be seen in the graphs in the index below gives the reader an idea as to how Ukraine stacks up in these different measures against peers. All these countries are middle-income or higher, but they have variation in certain areas. This specific Ukraine-Latvia comparison demonstrates that the cases of former soviet republic's political and economic evolution have not all been uniform and that there is room for differentiation. Thus far we have discussed in depth part of Ukraine's history under Soviet control and its implications for socio-economic conditions in the country, and what they tell us. Now we can transition into discussing the economic impact of the war in the east specifically.

As stated previously, Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 after the Ukrainian *Maidan* Revolution, to defend their interest within the country (CIA World Factbook 2021). The war has also involved Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, which are known as the Donbas, and are the most eastern regions of Ukraine (Adarov et al. 2015, 12). The importance of the Donbas to the Ukrainian economy cannot be overstated, as it had the status as the most critical industrial region of the country. 16% of Ukrainian GDP and a quarter of exports came out of this region and it had a reputation as one of the most developed areas in the country. At the outset of the war, small businesses saw the greatest impact but as it heated up throughout 2014 the crucial metallurgical and chemical industries were also affected (Adarov et al. 2015, 12). July 2014 would mark the first time industrial output decreases were noted, and it is estimated that 30% of output in Donetsk and 40% in Luhansk declined, being the main factor in an 11% drop countrywide (Adarov et al. 2015, 12-13). It is estimated that infrastructure damage in Donbas accounted for \$10 billion in damage and 8% of Ukraine's GDP (Adarov et al. 2015, 13). The impact of the Crimean and Sevastopol annexation was not as significant because they accounted for only about 4% of GDP, and the fact that Russia is wealthier than Ukraine might be attractive to residents because of the greater chance of wealth transfers from the state (Adarov et al. 2014, 14-15). However, this region possesses significant tourist infrastructure as it is located on the Black Sea, as well as oil and mineral deposits offshore, so there was still loss in potential future output for the Ukrainian economy (Adarov et al. 2015, 15). In another matter, demographically speaking Ukraine overall has also seen a significant rise in migration as a result of the war

especially among young people which has implications for economic development and growth (Stulako and Simakhova 2018, 13).

The impact of the annexation of Crimea and the civil war with separatists in Donbas has had a significantly negative impact on Ukraine, and poor conditions existed prior to its initiation. Donbas specifically sustained heavy economic and population losses post-1991 (Mykhnenko 2020, 533). Before the reforms known as *perestroika* during the 1980s, the region saw large population growth. However, between 1985 and 2013 the population fell by 20% from around 4 to 3.2 million. The livelihoods of the Donbas's residents were also dependent on labor intensive industries, and as a result by 2013 1/3rd, 2.1 million, of the population had reached the age of retirement and 20% of GDP went towards pension payments (Mykhnenko 2020, 533). Additionally, while Donbas pre-2014 was economically important it still fell victim to the decline of industrialization that had started in the rest of the country, with the economy only growing at 6.3% annually against 8.7% nationally from 1999 to 2014 (Mykhnenko 2020, 535). A decline in agricultural outputs in the post-1991 time period also ensured that the region would have to rely on food brought in from other provinces and countries, inhibiting its independence (Mykhnenko 2020, 535). Additionally, despite its apparent success, Donbas was not able to court much foreign direct investment (Mykhnenko 2020, 537). This indicates that pre-war there was already pronounced economic issues in this contested region, as there was in the rest of Ukraine. Casualty-wise, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from April 14, 2014 to February 15, 2019 there were 40-43,000 casualties due to fighting between separatist and Russian forces including 3,321 civilians and 9,500 combatants killed (Mykhnenko 2020, 541-542). It has also been estimated that 3.3 million people have been displaced from their homes which adds to the implications for the Ukrainian economy (Mykhnenko 2020, 542).

Anti-government separatists control 38% of Donbas and 45% of the population, so the reality is that they do not control most of the people (Mykhnenko 2020, 544). On an interesting note, some businesses re-registered themselves with the Ukrainian government however they also paid bribes to separatist forces and in 2017 these forces seized non-Russian owned assets in Donbas (Mykhnenko 2020, 544-545). Overall, separatist controlled areas industrial output was estimated to be 50.3% of the pre-2014 levels in Donetsk and 35.6% in Luhansk (Mykhnenko 2020, 548). From the human perspective, Ukrainians in both government and separatist-

controlled areas have also seen a significant drop in their standard of living. Those living in Ukrainian controlled areas of Donetsk were estimated in 2017 to have an average monthly wage that was 63% of pre-2014 levels and 38% in separatist controlled areas. In Luhansk the average monthly wage in separatist controlled areas at the same time was put at 34% of pre-2014 figures (Mykhnenko 2020, 548). It has been stated that the areas located within Donbas can be demarcated between Ukrainian and separatist controlled, and it should be noted that the latter effectively acts as a parallel government controlled by Russia (Mykhnenko 2020, 550-551). The headquarters of Donbas's administration is in the Russian city of Rostov-On-Don in Rostov Oblast which lies across the border in Russia and the Russian government manages its economy, including disbursements to pensioners (Mykhnenko 2020, 550-551). While the information discussed here shows that there is some sort of state that has emerged in Donbas, the reality is that it does not have the economic or demographic conditions necessary to stay independent of Russia (Mykhnenko 2020, 554).

It was important to specifically discuss the impact of the annexation of Crimea and the war in the eastern region of Donbas on Ukrainian political economy. The loss of the former had political implications, and the conflict in the latter has current implications. The fact that there are two parallel governments in Donetsk and Luhansk, which make up Donbas, shows that there is still real capacity for economic output. The issues facing Donbas are the most important in determining the future of Ukraine, as the conflict is still on going there. In addition, the discussion of specific economic, social, and political problems in Donbas pre- and post-2014 also provides more context for the wider issues Ukraine has been facing. The war certainly exacerbated already collapsing social conditions in the region, like accelerant on a fire. The important part for Ukraine in this case is that Donbas under Russian administration is not viable as an independent state (Mykhnenko 2020, 554). While Russia might be able to stay in the region if it wants, the failure to build a functioning economy will likely inhibit them from exploiting Donbas's assets and resources. In addition, it allows the Ukrainian state to maintain its legitimacy in the face of a serious challenge towards it. Most importantly, Donbas's decline pre-2014 despite being on paper one of the most productive regions in Ukraine should be a warning to the government if they have any postwar strategy to rebuild the region and shore up the Ukrainian economy.

This paper was structured to provide an initial primer on the key factor(s) within Ukraine that explain much of its contemporary situation, its past with Russia and the Soviet Union. It then moved into a discussion about the economic, political, and social trends that tell the story of Ukrainian political economy. The front and center issue that is negatively impacting Ukraine, the war in the east, was discussed next which further developed the context of the case. The problem that Ukraine has is that there is an armed separatist movement funded by a superpower that controls a significant amount of its territory. So long as these elements can operate, they will be a hindrance to the country's economic recovery and a threat to its existence. The Crimea case was not discussed as a factor because Russia has asserted total control over the region and the prospect for getting it back is not very high. The issue in resolving the economic problems that Ukraine faces is that the war will always take center stage. Basic realist theory in international relations posits that states are concerned with their own survival. If this is held to be true, then any changes in political economy should depend on the resolution of the war. This resolution exists between two poles, one being that Ukraine is defeated and fully subordinated to Russia or that Russia is defeated and withdraws from the east and the separatists demobilized. Both poles are two extremes, but this shows that a myriad of outcomes makes planning for the future difficult.

What exactly should be the appropriate political economy recommendations for Ukraine as it moves into the future? I first want to return to Besley and Persson (2011). While Ukraine is currently a *redistributive state*, it has the potential to become a *common interest state* because it actively invests in defense and Ukrainian controlled territories have some stability (Besley and Persson 2014, 14). This would involve the building of *legal capacity* as a complement and a support for *fiscal capacity*, and the building of a truly open market economy, which would demonstrate to Ukrainians that there are efforts to improve their lives, not just enrich favored oligarchs (Besley and Persson 2011, 15-16). If this capacity is built, we should also see an increase in the flow of tax revenues (Besley and Persson 2011, 15-16). Besley and Persson also posit that past wars indicate greater support in the future for public goods because war requires heavy public expenditures (Besley and Persson 2011, 16-18). While Ukraine's war is ongoing, I would expect that it has increased the demand for public goods. If the state can increase public expenditure, then it can maintain fiscal capacity and shore up the legitimacy of the political system while ending the war at the same time (Besley and Persson 2011, 16-18).

As discussed regarding North et al., Ukraine is a *Limited Access Order* in that it does not have open economic competition (2012 1-2). I would recommend that the Ukrainian government attempt to tackle the problem of oligarchy in the country in order to strengthen its own legitimacy and build a true free market economy. While those who live within the part of the country not under separatist control support the government, the elimination of this official corruption would help Ukraine develop and grow. The government should also be able to move on from a system that allows a small group of people to dictate much of what occurs within the country. While the Ukrainian government has shown remarkable resilience in fighting off the separatist and Russian threat in the east when that is over, they must be able to move the country forward. If we go back to the country's 2020 Corruption Perception Index ranking, we see it is at 33, which indicates high corruption (Transparency International 2021). Much like what was discussed under Besley and Persson (2011), reducing the perception of corruption should bring the government more stability and legitimacy.

A straight economic solution to Ukraine's woes does not exist because of the conflict within its borders and the end of it will be the determinant in this case. The solutions are primarily political, such as reducing corruption and building state capacity. Doing so will enable the government to function better during wartime and maintain cohesion during peace. The structure of Ukraine's political-economy pre-2014 certainly caused problems as the war began and contributed to perceptions of government corruption, which usually corresponds with incompetence. Lastly, I also want to return to the discussion of its Russian connections. The reality is that there will always be cultural, linguistic, and economic connections with Russia. Building the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state will reduce the internal and external perception that the government does not enjoy support among all groups who reside in the country and is therefore illegitimate. Ultimately, Ukraine must make the requisite changes necessary to position itself to emerge from the war with a semblance of cohesion and this will depend on the will of those who have the power to create change.

Index

Figure 1

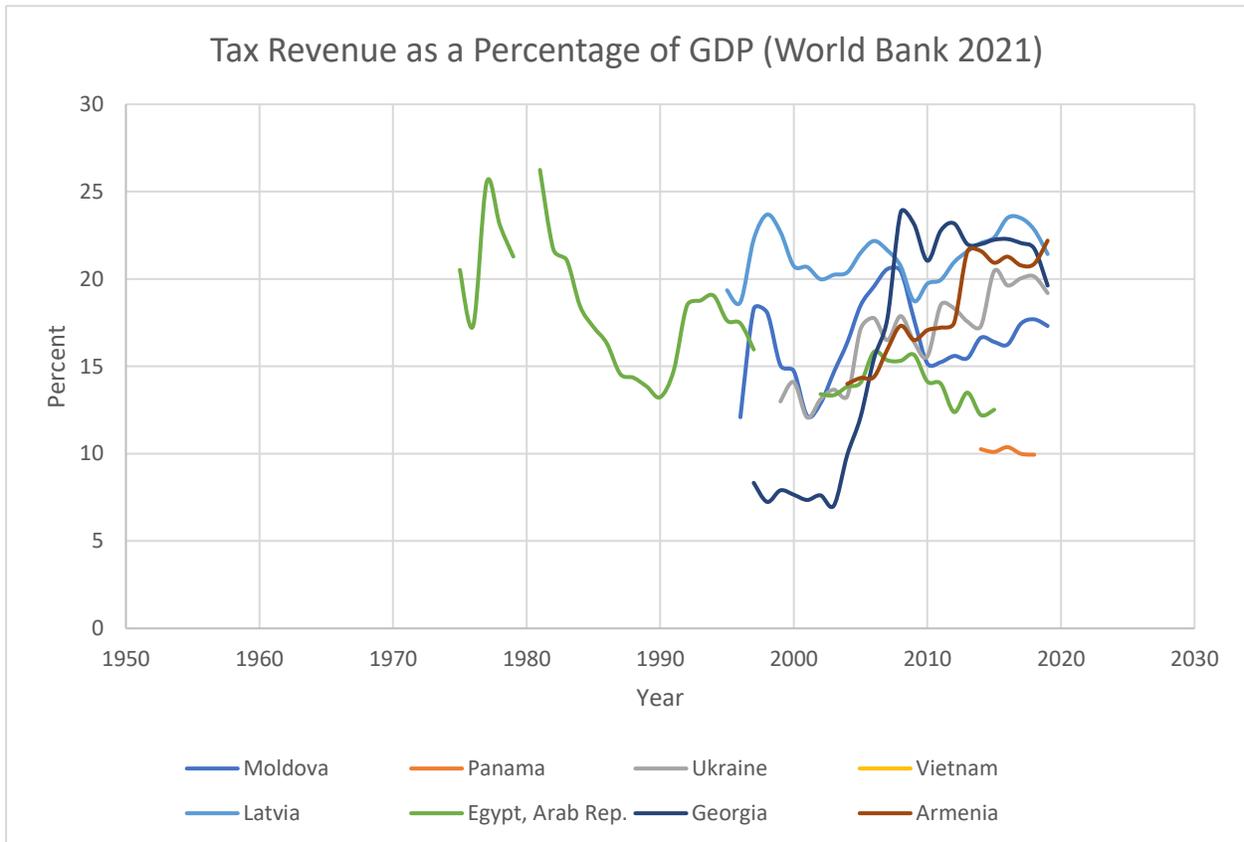


Figure 2

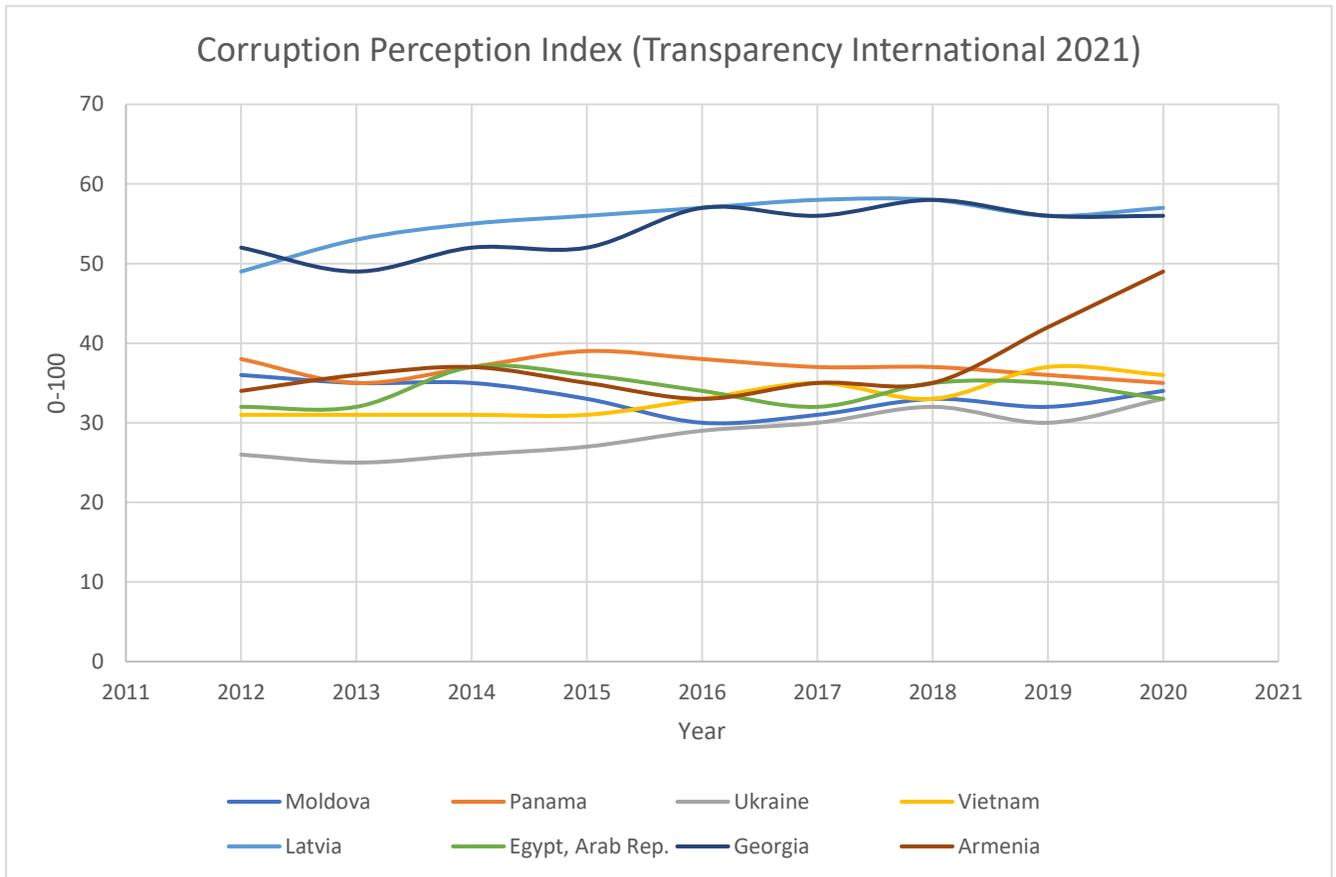


Figure 3

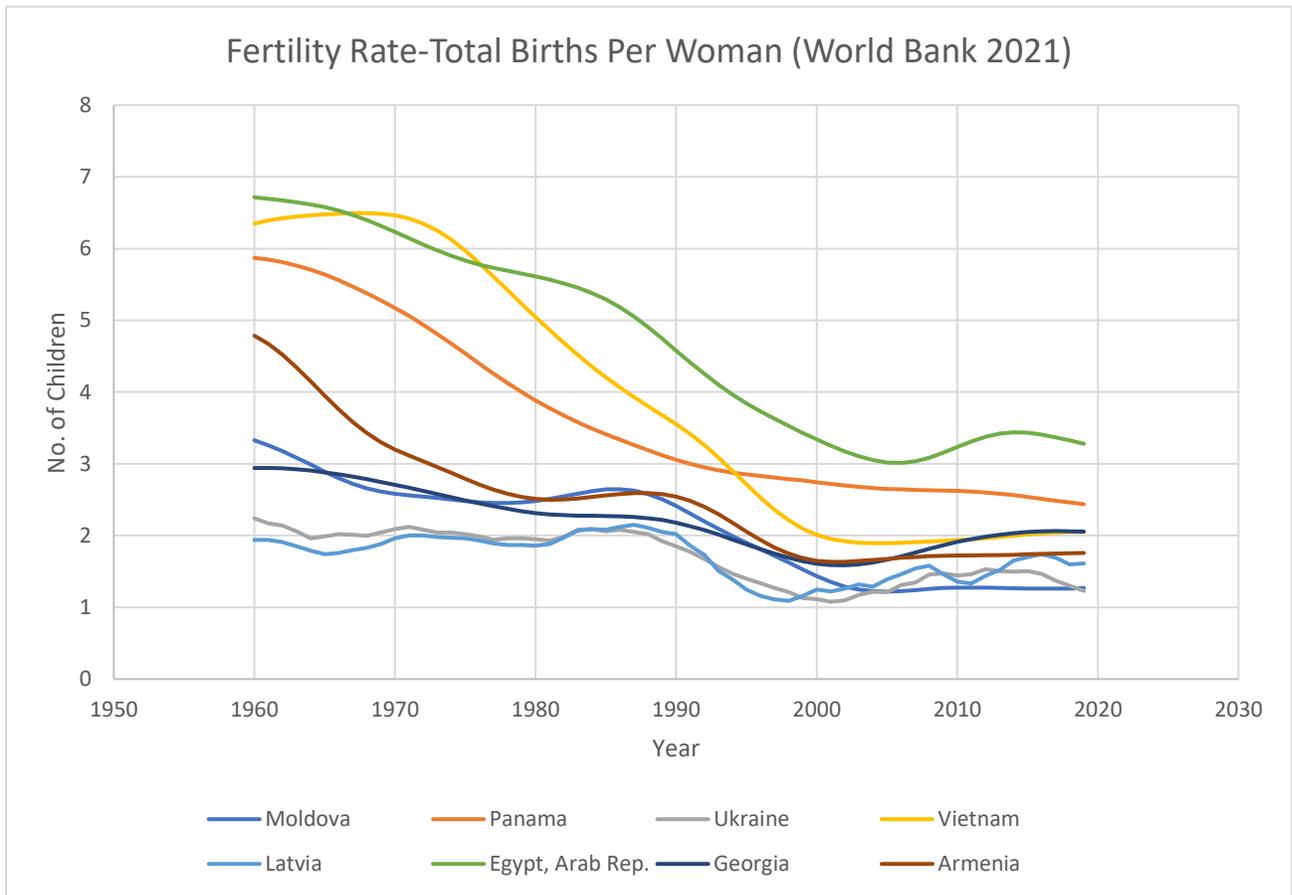


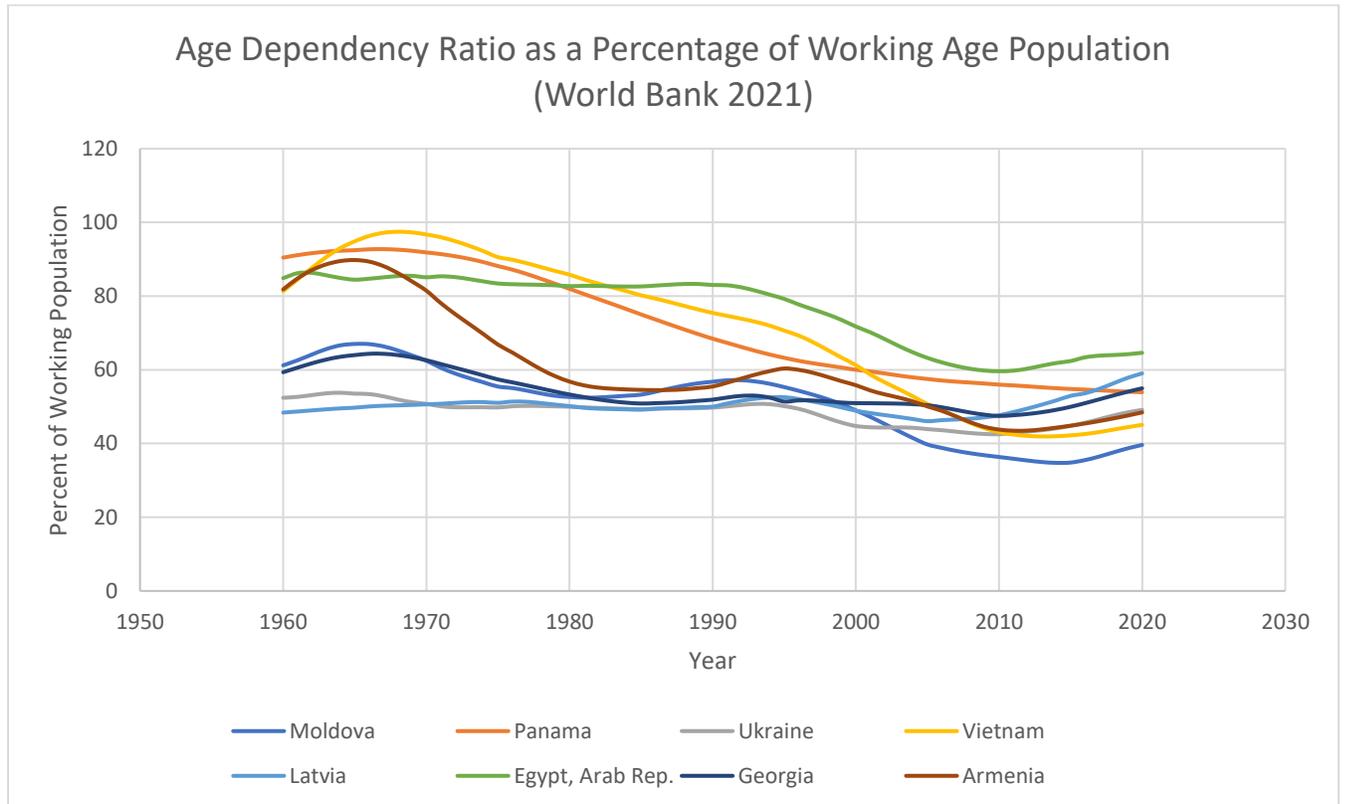
Figure 4

Figure 5

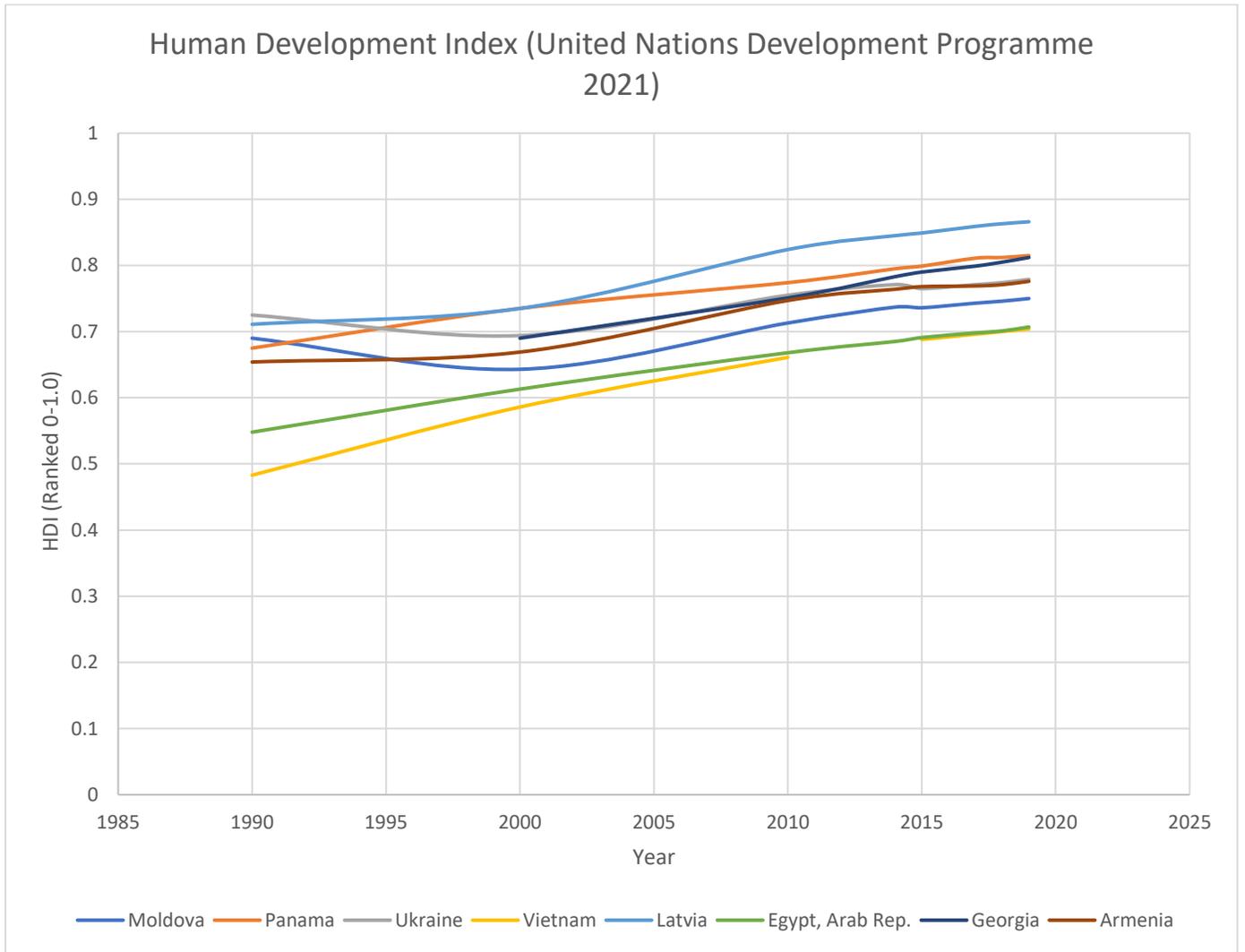
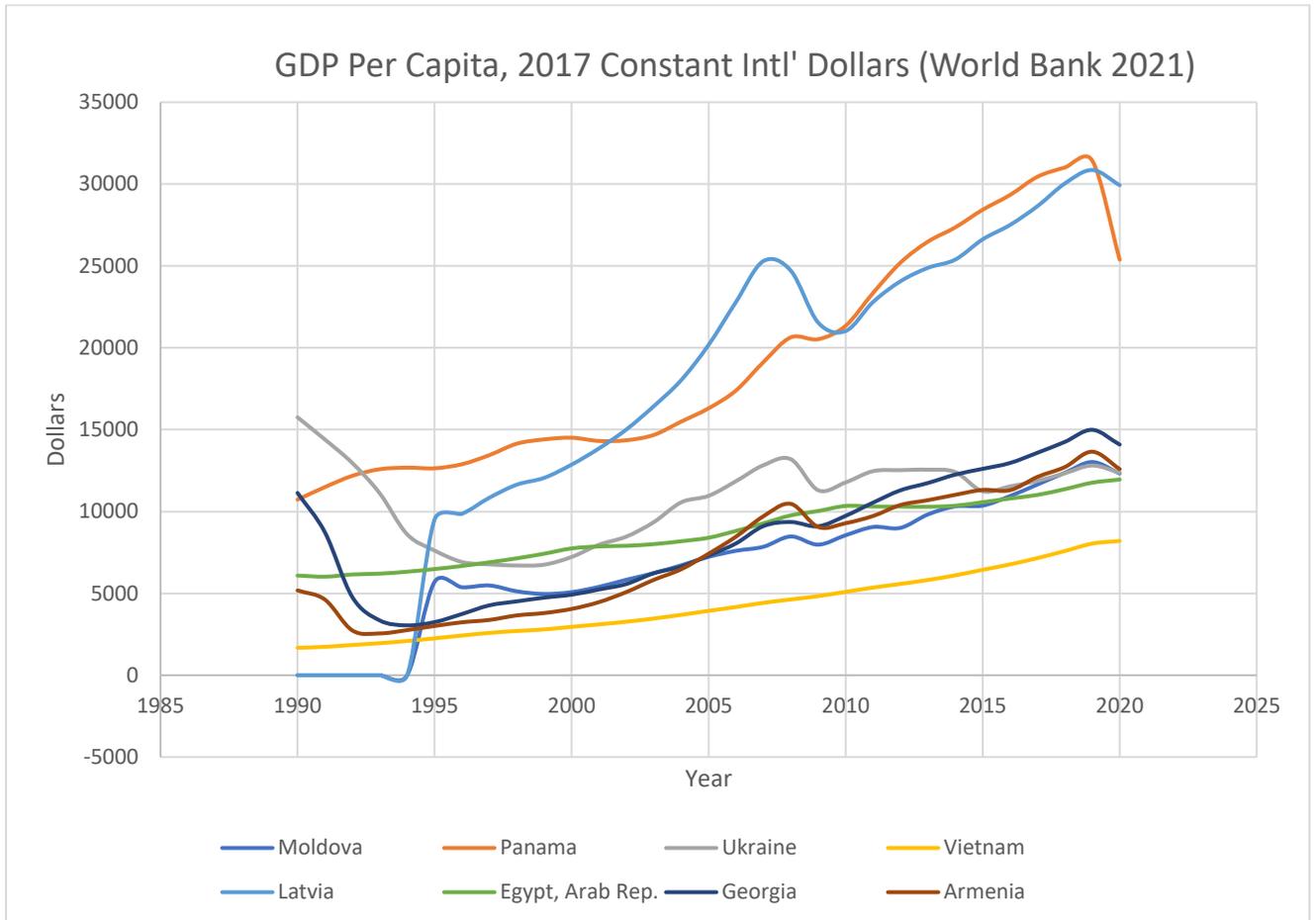


Figure 6



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