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Ukraine is turning West in its economic thinking



Rainer Zitelmann

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Ukraine and Russia once shared a Soviet system but are now moving in opposite directions. One is becoming more aligned with the economic values of Western democracies; the other remains rooted in a tradition of state control, says Rainer Zitelmann

A quiet but consequential shift is underway in Eastern Europe. While geopolitical attention has focused on war and security, a new study published in the journal [Economic Affairs](#) points to a deeper transformation: a divergence in economic beliefs between Ukraine and Russia that may shape the region's future just as much as military outcomes.

The study draws on opinion polls conducted in Ukraine, Poland and Russia, examining attitudes toward the market economy and capitalism. Its findings are striking. Ukrainians today express some of the most positive views of the market economy worldwide – ranking behind only a handful

of countries including Poland, the United States, the Czech Republic, South Korea and Japan. By contrast, Russia ranks last among 36 countries surveyed. In most countries (including Poland and Russia), the survey was conducted by Ipsos Mori; in Ukraine, it was commissioned by the International Institute of Freedom.

Instead of asking directly about “capitalism” – a term that often carries ideological connotations – the study first used six questions about economic systems without mentioning the word at all. This approach addresses a well-known issue: many people respond negatively to the label “capitalism”, even when they support the underlying principles such as competition, private ownership and economic freedom.

When asked about these principles in neutral terms, only about one in ten respondents in Ukraine and Poland agreed with the statement that “we need a lot more state intervention in the economy, since the market fails time and again,” compared with one in four in Russia.

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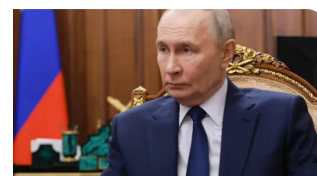
Differences become even clearer when respondents were asked about more concrete policies. Consider the statement that the state should set prices for rent and food and impose minimum and maximum wages. In Ukraine, 32 per cent supported this idea. In Poland, just 19 per cent agreed. In Russia, the number surged to 65 percent – more than double the Ukrainian level.

Diverging culture

These results point to a fundamental divergence in political culture between two countries that once shared the same Soviet system. Ukrainians, it appears, are moving toward a worldview that embraces markets and limits the role of the state. Russians, by contrast, remain far more inclined to favor government control.

The contrast becomes even sharper when the term “capitalism” is introduced explicitly. The study included an association test with ten terms related to capitalism, along with 18 additional statements – both positive and negative – about the system. Here again, Ukraine stands out. Among the 36 countries surveyed, only Poland shows higher support for capitalism, while the United States ranks at a similarly high level. In 33 countries, perceptions of capitalism are more negative than in Ukraine.

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Russia sits at the opposite end of the spectrum. In only two countries are attitudes toward capitalism more negative than in Russia. This gap is not marginal; it is profound.

Some caution is warranted in interpreting the results. The surveys in Poland and Russia were conducted several years earlier – between 2021 and early 2022 – while the Ukrainian survey took place in September 2025. Yet the differences are so large that it is difficult to attribute them primarily to timing. Moreover, all three surveys used the same questionnaire, making comparisons unusually robust.

The explanation lies less in recent events than in long-term economic experience. Since 1990, Poland has undergone one of the most successful economic transformations in modern history, with sustained growth, rising incomes, and increasing integration into global markets.

The success of Poland provides a visible example of what market-oriented reforms can achieve

Russia's trajectory has been far more uneven, marked by periods of stagnation, heavy state involvement, a kleptocracy that does not respect private property, and a persistent reliance on natural resources.

Ukrainians, situated between these two models, have drawn their own conclusions. The success of Poland provides a visible example of what market-oriented reforms can achieve. Russia, by contrast, offers a cautionary tale.

The findings also reveal important demographic patterns. As in most countries, support for the market economy and capitalism in Ukraine is higher among those with greater education and higher incomes. Men tend to express more favorable views than women, and this gender gap is particularly pronounced in Ukraine. Yet across age groups, the overall pattern holds: both younger and older Ukrainians show broadly positive attitudes toward markets.

Taken together, these results challenge the assumption that post-Soviet societies share similar economic mentalities. In reality, Ukraine and Russia are moving in opposite directions. One is becoming more aligned with the economic values of Western democracies; the other remains rooted in a tradition of state control.

Rainer Zitelmann is a historian and sociologist; his next book will be published soon: NEW SPACE CAPITALISM <https://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/9781510788220/new-space-capitalism/>

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