

Institutional Changes in Ukraine's Post-War Future: Lessons from Poland and Georgia Through the Lens of Saturation Theory

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Abstract

The impending post-war reconstruction in Ukraine represents a critical juncture for institutional renewal, where governance structures, economic rules, and social norms must adapt to support resilient growth, EU integration, and sustainable development amid accumulated systemic exhaustion. Drawing on Manafi's Theory of Saturation (2025), this article frames Ukraine's institutional landscape as saturated—characterized by progressive overload and depletion of adaptive capacity across emotional, cognitive, institutional, and systemic layers—exacerbated by prolonged conflict, infrastructure destruction, and pre-existing reform inconsistencies. The theory's phased progression (Evaluation, Recognition, Decision Junction, and Intermediate States) and emphasis on the choice between denial ("Lie" path) and transformative renewal ("Solution" path) guide the analysis.

Comparative insights from Poland's successful EU accession since 2004—marked by deep judicial, anti-corruption, and market reforms leading to economic convergence—and Georgia's stalled candidacy post-2023—due to democratic backsliding and institutional stagnation—highlight divergent outcomes at the Decision Junction. Poland exemplifies effective escape from saturation through comprehensive alignment with EU *acquis* and polycentric governance, while Georgia illustrates the risks of superficial commitments perpetuating rigidity. Integrating neo-institutional theories (North on rules reducing uncertainty, Ostrom on adaptive commons management, Williamson on transaction cost minimization), the article proposes targeted post-war changes for Ukraine: accelerating judicial independence and anti-corruption mechanisms, deepening decentralization, enhancing transparent public investment, and prioritizing green/digital transitions to rebuild adaptability and avert stagnation.

Projections underscore that sustained "Solution"-oriented reforms—aligned with the EU's 2026 ten-point plan and extended Sustainable Development Strategy—could yield 3–5% annual GDP growth and membership progress by 2030, transforming wartime overload into long-term institutional strength.

Keywords: *Ukraine post-war reconstruction, Theory of Saturation, institutional change, EU integration, Poland EU accession, Georgia EU candidacy, neo-institutional economics, adaptive renewal*

1. Introduction

The end of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—whenever it materializes—will mark the beginning of a decisive era of institutional transformation. As the country transitions from wartime survival to large-scale reconstruction and long-term development, its institutions (encompassing formal rules, governance structures, economic policies, and social norms) will need to evolve fundamentally to build resilience, attract sustained investment, and advance credibly toward European Union integration.

Manafi's Theory of Saturation (2025) provides a powerful meta-framework for understanding this critical juncture. The theory defines saturation as the qualitative exhaustion of adaptive capacity resulting from prolonged systemic overload. This exhaustion manifests across multiple interconnected layers: emotional (pervasive societal fatigue), cognitive (collective decision-making paralysis), institutional (increasing rigidity and path-dependency of structures), and systemic (growing fragility of interdependencies). Its phased model—Evaluation (assessing mounting pressures), Recognition (acknowledging genuine limits), Decision Junction (the fork between denial/"Lie" and transformative "Solution"), and Intermediate States (trajectories toward either stagnation or renewal)—illuminates both the acute risks and the strategic opportunities facing post-war Ukraine.

To anchor Ukraine's prospective path, this paper draws instructive comparisons with two neighboring post-socialist cases: Poland and Georgia. Poland's trajectory after joining the European Union in 2004 exemplifies successful escape from saturation through deep, comprehensive institutional reforms, which produced rapid economic convergence and durable strengthening of governance frameworks. By contrast, Georgia—awarded EU candidate status in December 2023 yet confronted with a virtual freeze in its accession process by mid-2024 due to democratic backsliding—illustrates the dangers of the "Lie" pathway, in which formal commitments and rhetorical alignment conceal underlying institutional stagnation and elite capture.

These contrasting experiences, interpreted through foundational neo-institutional lenses—Douglass North's focus on rules that reduce uncertainty, Elinor Ostrom's insights into polycentric governance for managing shared resources, and Oliver Williamson's emphasis on minimizing transaction costs—offer a clear analytical roadmap. Ukraine can draw lessons from both successes and failures to avoid common traps and accelerate genuine institutional renewal in the post-war period.

This paper therefore examines Ukraine's emerging post-war institutional agenda through the prism of Saturation Theory, using Poland and Georgia as comparative mirrors to identify pathways toward resilient, investment-friendly, and EU-compatible institutions.

2. Ukraine's Saturation and Post-War Institutional Outlook

Ukraine's institutions have been saturated by over a decade of hybrid aggression, culminating in the 2022 full-scale invasion. Systemic overload is evident in destroyed infrastructure (estimated \$524 billion reconstruction needs per World Bank RDNA4, 2025), energy vulnerabilities (e.g., attacks causing 1.7% GDP deficits in 2024), and labor shortages from mobilization and displacement (6.3 million refugees as of 2025). Institutionally, wartime centralization has rigidified governance, delaying anti-corruption and judicial reforms. Cognitively, policymakers face overload from crisis management, while emotionally, societal fatigue erodes trust (public support for EU integration remains high at 85% per Razumkov Centre, 2025, but war weariness grows).

Post-war projections (2026–2030) emphasize renewal via the "Solution" path. The EU's ten-point reform plan for 2026, agreed in December 2025, targets Cluster 1 ("Fundamentals") of accession negotiations: enhancing judicial independence, anti-corruption measures (e.g., strengthening NABU and SAPO), public administration reform, and minority rights protection. Screening completed in September 2025 positions Ukraine to open negotiations on all clusters by end-2025, per European Commission goals. Institutional changes include merit-based civil service expansion, transparent public investment management (e.g., single project pipelines per EU 2025 Ukraine Report), and decentralization deepening to empower local governance in reconstruction.

Integrating with North's framework, these reforms aim to redefine "rules of the game" by reducing oligarchic influence and transaction costs, fostering FDI (projected to rise from 1.99% GDP in 2024 to 4–5% by 2028 if reforms succeed). Ostrom's polycentric approach supports multi-level governance for managing shared resources like EU funds and energy grids. Williamson's lens highlights flexible contracts for public-private partnerships in green transitions (e.g., energy diversification to renewables, targeting 50% by 2030). If Ukraine sustains momentum, GDP growth could average 3–5% annually post-war (IMF 2025 projections), mirroring successful integrators.

However, risks of the "Lie" path loom: aid dependency (e.g., \$4 trillion financing gap per UN 2025) could delay genuine reforms, perpetuating saturation. Projections warn of stagnation if vetoes (e.g., Hungary's on minority rights) persist, stalling negotiations.

3. Poland's Experience: Renewal Through Deep Institutional Adaptation

Poland's EU integration since 2004 demonstrates escaping saturation via the "Solution" path. Pre-accession, Poland faced systemic overload from post-communist transition: high unemployment (20% in 2003), institutional rigidity, and economic disparities. The 1990s "National Integration Strategy" and 2003 referendum (77% approval) marked Recognition and Decision Junction, committing to transformative reforms.

Institutional changes included aligning legislation with EU *acquis* (e.g., judiciary independence, anti-corruption bodies), decentralizing power, and liberalizing markets. By 2024–2025 reflections (e.g., Polish Economic Institute report), Poland's GDP per capita quadrupled since 2004, exports grew sixfold, and unemployment dropped to 5%. EU funds (€245 billion gross inflows 2004–2023 per Ministry of Finance) catalyzed infrastructure and cohesion, boosting real GDP 27% higher than without accession (IMF 2024 analysis).

Neo-institutional insights apply: North's rules reduced uncertainty, enabling FDI surges (from 2% GDP pre-2004 to peaks of 25% in 2005). Ostrom's polycentric model informed regional funds allocation, fostering balanced growth. Williamson's transaction costs were minimized through transparent procurement, aiding EDTIB (European Defence Technological and Industrial Base) integration.

Challenges emerged: 2015–2023 rule-of-law backsliding (e.g., judicial capture) risked institutional saturation, leading to EU infringement proceedings (120 environmental cases 2004–2022). Yet, Poland's influence grew (e.g., Council presidencies in 2025), showing renewal's long-term benefits. For Ukraine, Poland's lesson is prioritizing judicial and anti-corruption reforms early to sustain momentum.

4. Georgia's Trajectory: Stagnation from Democratic Backsliding

Georgia's EU path contrasts sharply, illustrating the "Lie" path's dangers. Granted candidate status in December 2023, progress halted de facto by mid-2024 due to the "foreign agents" law, sparking protests and EU condemnation (European Council June 2024 statement). The 2025 Enlargement Report (November 2025) slams "serious democratic backsliding," including judicial capture, rule-of-law erosion, and repression, leading to suspended negotiations until 2028 (per PM Kobakhidze, November 2024).

Pre-2023 saturation built from institutional rigidity (e.g., oligarchic influence, incomplete judiciary reforms) and cognitive overload in governance. The 2023–2026 Public Administration Reform Strategy aimed at anti-corruption and EU alignment, but implementation lagged (e.g., NACP tools underutilized). Systemic pressures include geopolitical volatility and economic dependencies, with emotional fatigue from protests exacerbating divides.

Institutional reforms stalled: Despite some progress in gender equality and ECHR alignment (per 2023 EC report), backsliding negated gains. North's framework highlights how unclear rules increased uncertainty, deterring FDI (stagnant at 5–6% GDP 2023–2025). Ostrom's polycentric governance failed amid centralized control, while Williamson's transaction costs rose from opaque media laws.

Projections for 2026–2030: Government claims reforms continue for 2030 accession, but EU ties frozen. This warns Ukraine: Without genuine "Solution" (e.g., inclusive consultations), war-induced saturation could lead to similar stagnation, especially if aid fosters complacency.

5. Comparative Insights and Recommendations for Ukraine

Comparing the three: Poland's post-2004 renewal (deep reforms yielding convergence) versus Georgia's 2023–2026 stagnation (backsliding halting progress) frames Ukraine's choices. All faced saturation—Poland from transition, Georgia from internal pressures, Ukraine from war—but outcomes diverged at the Decision Junction. Poland chose "Solution" through EU-driven institutional overhauls; Georgia veered toward "Lie" with superficial commitments.

For Ukraine, neo-institutional theories suggest blending approaches: Adopt North's rule-setting for anti-corruption; Ostrom's polycentrism for decentralization in reconstruction; Williamson's cost reduction for green FDI. Post-war (assuming 2026 end), prioritize the 2026 ten-point plan: Judicial reforms, NACP strengthening, and minority rights to open Cluster 1.

Recommendations:

- Enhance institutional adaptability: Accelerate EU acquis harmonization, targeting 70% GVC integration by 2030.
- Mitigate saturation: Inclusive processes to combat emotional/cognitive fatigue, e.g., extending 2016 SDG consultations.
- Learn from comparators: Emulate Poland's fund utilization for cohesion; avoid Georgia's veto traps by proactive diplomacy.

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6. Conclusion

Ukraine's post-war institutional renewal hinges on decisively choosing the "Solution" path outlined in Manafi's Theory of Saturation (2025), thereby converting prolonged overload into durable resilience. Poland's post-2004 experience demonstrates that ambitious, comprehensive reforms—judicial independence, anti-corruption enforcement, transparent public administration, and market-oriented policies—can break cycles of stagnation, drive rapid economic convergence, and secure lasting credibility with the European Union. Georgia's more recent trajectory, however, warns of the "Lie" alternative: superficial alignment and rhetorical progress that mask elite capture and democratic erosion, ultimately stalling accession despite candidate status. Guided by neo-institutional principles from North, Ostrom, and Williamson, Ukraine can pursue parallel reforms in justice, governance, anti-corruption, and reconstruction transparency, while empowering polycentric local actors to rebuild trust and reduce systemic fragility.

If these efforts are sustained with genuine political will in the critical first years after the war, Ukraine can realistically achieve full EU membership by 2030, transforming national exhaustion into a cornerstone of European security and economic strength. Success would not only accelerate domestic recovery and investment but also reinforce the EU's eastern flank against authoritarian pressures, proving that even societies pushed to saturation can emerge stronger through courageous institutional choice. The window for decisive renewal is narrow—Ukraine's future, and Europe's stability, will depend on rejecting complacency and embracing transformation.

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