



The political context of public sector innovation: A critical interpretive synthesis on Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Innovation often sparks power struggles, redistributes resources, and challenges entrenched institutional legacies. Yet the role of power dynamics embedded in political contexts, particularly in non-Western countries, in shaping public sector innovation (PSI) has remained underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining how power dynamics at multiple levels and critical junctures have shaped PSI trajectories over time in Ukraine. Drawing on historical institutionalism and using a context-specific critical interpretive synthesis of 84 studies from 1991 to 2022, we reveal how critical junctures intensified PSI and enabled new innovation priorities. However, these moments were deeply conditioned by existing power dynamics across international, national and subnational political levels. While some innovations contributed to the redistribution of power, others were stalled or fragmented owing to path dependencies. This study makes two primary theoretical contributions: first, it reconceptualizes political context as a dynamic, multilevel arena of vertical and horizontal power contestations that shapes PSI; second, it extends PSI theory by demonstrating how critical junctures operate as temporally bounded periods of constrained agency, cumulatively shaping innovation trajectories. These insights advance our understanding of the complex interplays between political contexts, power dynamics, and temporality in PSI.

1. Introduction

The significance of public sector innovation (PSI) resides in its potential to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness of public services (Vassallo et al., 2023). PSI involves the adoption and implementation of novel practices, uniquely tailored to their contexts, with the objective of creating impactful change in the public sector and in society (Zhu and Zhang, 2019; Vassallo et al., 2023). Since the 1990s, the PSI literature has examined various aspects of innovation, including the problems that innovations aim to solve (Borins, 2014), sources of innovation (Callens and Verhoest, 2024; Knox et al., 2024; Clausen et al., 2020), barriers to innovation (Cinar et al., 2021), antecedents of innovation (Demircioglu and Audretsch, 2017), innovation strategies (Cinar et al., 2023; Guenduez et al., 2025; Hartley et al., 2013), service models (Schedler and Guenduez, 2024), and innovation outcomes (Dockx and Verhoest, 2023).

In line with a recent systematic review of PSI (Criado et al., 2023), we argue that a key limitation of the literature is the lack of in-depth understanding of how power dynamics embedded in political contexts, and the political transitions they generate, influence PSI. While recent scholarship acknowledges political context as a key enabling factor at multiple political levels including international (e.g., the processes for integration into EU), national (e.g., periods under pragmatic political leadership), and local (e.g., reform-oriented governance at subnational levels) (Cinar et al., 2024a), the ways in which power struggles, both within and across these levels, and the political transitions that emerge from such struggles, actively shape innovation efforts over time have been insufficiently explored. The literature (e.g., Cinar et al., 2024b) has rarely moved beyond a focus on successful innovations and has often neglected the deeper dynamics of political context through which power is redistributed or maintained (Pierson, 2016), as well as the ways in which vertical and horizontal contestation, together with institutional

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legacies, contribute to stalled PSI. Further, the literature on PSI has also focused mainly on Western, developed national contexts, leading to an incomplete understanding of innovation dynamics in developing countries (Demircioglu et al., 2024; Suzuki et al., 2020). Thus, there is very limited insight into how innovation is shaped by diverse political contexts.

Building on this core research problem, we draw on historical institutionalism (HI), particularly the concepts of critical junctures and path dependency (Capoccia, 2016), as an analytical lens for examining how political transitions and power dynamics shape PSI trajectories. While some studies, such as Cinar et al. (2024b), acknowledge HI's relevance and highlight temporal markers such as elections or crises as moments of potential change, they often do so in cursory ways. HI's analytical potential has remained underutilized, with little attention to how institutional legacies and power dynamics constrain or enable agency during these junctures. For instance, although Cinar et al. (2024b) identified electoral setback in soft-authoritarian regimes as a critical moment that triggers an externally-oriented PSI agenda, the mechanisms through which such a political transition interacts with existing institutional arrangements and enhances or limits available innovation trajectories have not yet been fully unpacked. Similarly, while crises are often portrayed in the PSI literature as catalysts for change (e.g., Cinar et al., 2024a), there is insufficient theorization of how such events function as critical junctures in path-dependent processes. A more comprehensive application of HI enables us to reveal the interplays between temporality, critical junctures, political transitions, and power dynamics in shaping innovation trajectories.

We apply this lens to the Ukrainian context, which provides a revelatory setting for studying these dynamics. Ukraine is a developing country¹ that has experienced profound power struggles and political transitions while engaging in PSI for a considerable period. Considering the ongoing conflict with Russia, increasing international collaboration, and the potential for a post-war recovery phase, a country-specific review of past PSI efforts is also both timely and necessary.

Accordingly, we conducted a context-specific critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) of 84 scholarly articles on PSI in Ukraine. This approach enables us to trace longitudinal developments from Ukraine's independence in 1991 to its invasion by Russia in 2022, and to synthesize multiple dimensions of political contexts and their influences on PSI over time. Our approach is guided by two primary research questions:

1. *How do power dynamics within political contexts shape PSI?*
2. *How do significant political transitions and critical junctures influence the selection and implementation of PSI priorities over time?*

This study makes two primary theoretical contributions to the literature on PSI. Our first key finding is that innovation priorities and their implementation are profoundly shaped by interconnected political dynamics operating across international, national, and subnational levels. Building on this, our first contribution is the conceptualization of political contexts in the PSI literature (e.g., Scott, 2021; Cinar et al., 2024b; Criado et al., 2023) by offering a framework for examining relevant contexts at the international, national, and subnational levels through a focus on power dynamics: power struggles, the redistribution of power, and path dependencies. Thus, we advance theory on PSI by reconceptualising political context as a dynamic, multilevel arena of ongoing contestation, in which power dynamics (both within and between international, national, and subnational levels) shape not only which innovation priorities are selected but also which are stalled. By foregrounding the mechanisms through which actors negotiate, resist, or institutionalize advantage, we develop a framework that explains the inherently fragmented and uneven PSI implementation in developing,

politically dynamic non-Western contexts. In doing so, we address the prevailing tendency of the PSI literature to focus on Western, developed national contexts (see Criado et al., 2023) and respond to the limited understanding of how innovation is shaped by diverse political settings with distinct power dynamics. We also address a key gap in the literature (e.g., Borins, 2014; Cinar et al., 2024b) by moving beyond accounts of successful innovation to illuminate how political resistance and the redistribution of power determine the full range of innovation trajectories in public services. It also helps address the challenge of understanding the nature of innovation in services (Martin, 2016) by identifying the contextual conditions surrounding innovation in public services.

Second, our analysis shows that significant political transitions, functioning as critical junctures that opened scope for agency, shaped innovation priorities focused on redistributing power. While these priorities evolved along a positive trajectory, progressively building on previous foundations, the path dependencies of past political legacies continued to constrain their implementation. Building on this, our contribution advances PSI theory by integrating HI with a temporal conception of political transitions and critical junctures that shape innovation trajectories over time. Drawing on Capoccia (2016) as well as Capoccia and Kelemen (2007), our findings show that crises and political transitions, opened by the permissive conditions of power struggles (Soifer, 2012), should not be seen as generic windows of opportunity for PSI (Cinar et al., 2024b), but rather as temporally bounded periods of heightened yet constrained agency. We show that the impacts of critical junctures on PSI depend less on the severity of disruption and more on productive conditions (Soifer, 2012) within the political context, namely, power struggles, path dependencies, and isomorphic pressures (Pierson, 2016) together with the trajectory of historical innovation priorities and the extent to which the intended power redistribution from the previous period is actually enacted. In our framework, crises temporarily relax institutional constraints without erasing them, creating moments in which agent choices are possible within historically bounded pathways. We further contribute to the limited number of PSI studies on trajectories (e.g., Salge, 2012; Cinar et al., 2024a) by demonstrating how these political dynamics shape innovation trajectories: early efforts, even if stalled, leave institutional legacies that feed into successive rounds of innovation priorities.

This study is structured as follows: a theoretical framework section defines and conceptualizes PSI, innovation priorities, and the dynamics of political context through the theoretical lens of HI, while the methodology section outlines the review and CIS process used to gather and analyze data. The results and discussion sections present our findings and their implications for PSI in Ukraine. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes this study's insights, offering directions for future research and policy formulation.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Public sector innovation, innovation priorities, and the national context

PSI refers to “the adoption, creation or development of ideas, objects and practices that are new to the unit of adoption” in the public sector (Cinar et al., 2024b, p.2). Given limited organizational resources, decision-makers often prioritize particular sets of innovations to tackle organizational or societal problems in the public or private sector (Fu et al., 2020; Brattström, 2021). Over time, this prioritization develops into an innovation trajectory, in which distinct innovation priorities emerge (Cinar et al., 2024a). While PSI is often examined through the lens of objectives, activities, and outcomes (Arundel et al., 2019), we primarily focus on how innovation priorities are shaped by a political context, while also tracing how these priorities are subsequently pursued and implemented over time.

We define innovation priorities as strategic, thematically bounded

¹ The World Bank's income classifications consider Ukraine to be a lower-middle-income country until 2023 (Metreau et al., 2024).

objectives that guide the design and allocation of innovation-related efforts and resources in the public sector. These priorities are not interchangeable with general policy goals; rather, they reflect a targeted policymaking subset that is specifically oriented to fostering PSI. While political contexts shape the emergence of these priorities, the two concepts are analytically and empirically distinct. Political context encompasses the structural and dynamic conditions that influence policymaking; these include governance arrangements, institutional legacies, political agendas, and international pressures (Hantrais, 2008). In contrast, innovation priorities emerge from agent choices among competing policy areas, often materialized through programmatic innovations or strategic reforms that seek to transform services delivery or administrative practices (Arundel et al., 2019). Recent examples of innovation priorities include digital transformation (Mergel et al., 2019), environmental sustainability (Suchitwarasan et al., 2024), and participatory governance (Karkin and Cezar, 2024). These priorities may evolve over time, but consistently serve as guiding frameworks for innovation-related decision-making and resource allocation in the public sector.

These priorities do not emerge in a vacuum; they are influenced by national contexts shaped by institutional legacies, governance structures, and prevailing power relationships (Cinar et al., 2024a). Indeed, agenda-setting and resource allocation for innovation are deeply intertwined with power and political contexts (Kluser and Radojevic, 2019). Elected officials, bureaucratic elites, and interest groups can strategically drive or hinder certain priorities, depending on how they align with their political objectives or resource interests (Drápalová, 2021). It is therefore crucial to examine how power is negotiated and exerted in political contexts if one is to understand which innovation priorities are selected and why some initiatives succeed while others stall. As Pierson (2016) notes, power often operates subtly by shaping agendas and framing acceptable policy choices, reinforcing institutional advantages and narrowing the scope of contestation. This makes it critical to examine not only who holds power, but how institutional contexts make certain innovation priorities seem feasible. These dynamics also shape how PSI unfolds along trajectories over time and innovation priorities evolve along cumulative paths rather than isolated episodes (Salge, 2012; Cinar et al., 2024a).

2.2. Historical institutionalism, path dependency, critical junctures, and transitions

HI offers a robust theoretical lens for understanding the dynamic and complex ways in which political contexts influence PSI by examining the institutional settings in which it emerges and how revolutionary transitions driven by power struggles, isomorphic pressures, path dependencies, and redistribution of power shape innovation processes. HI posits that institutional settings are not merely formal structures but are deeply embedded systems of beliefs, norms, and interaction patterns (Thelen, 1999). This perspective also moves beyond viewing political contexts as static entities, framing them instead as historically contingent constructs that shape and are shaped by power struggles (Peters et al., 2005; Roberts and Geels, 2019).

Central to HI is the recognition that history matters (Hall and Taylor, 1996). HI emphasizes the enduring influences of institutional settings, asserting that their evolution is deeply embedded in broader historical paths (Thelen, 1999). These settings (including the political context) influence how problems are framed and how solutions are developed (North, 1990). Researchers who employ HI analyze developmental trajectories, investigating how structures and practices evolve over time through interconnected processes shaped by power struggles, isomorphic pressures, critical junctures, and path dependency (Peters et al., 2005; Pierson, 2000; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). By integrating these dimensions, HI provides a nuanced lens to unravel how political settings both constrain and enable innovation in specific historical contexts as well as how their transitions can influence innovation (Geels, 2004).

There are preliminary insights in the PSI literature on how national contexts (particularly political contexts) can influence prioritized innovation types (e.g., Cinar et al., 2024a; Suchitwarasan et al., 2024), and a few studies also suggest that PSI follows historical trajectories, underscoring the importance of temporal perspectives in understanding innovation characteristics (Salge, 2012; Cinar et al., 2024b).

The concept of path dependency is also central to an HI perspective: HI defines path dependency as a phenomenon in which historical choices establish self-reinforcing mechanisms that privilege certain institutional arrangements while marginalizing alternatives (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). HI posits that, once these trajectories are established, they become hard to alter owing to increasing returns, while the costs of deviation grow over time. These dynamics entrench existing power asymmetries, privileging dominant actors and marginalizing alternative approaches (Roberts and Geels, 2019). For instance, the centralized governance models inherited from Soviet-era bureaucracies in post-Soviet countries continue to influence the structures and behaviors of public institutions, limiting the scope for decentralized innovation (Mussagulova, 2021; Kurmanov and Knox, 2024).

While path dependency constrains change by locking institutions into self-reinforcing trajectories, this constraint is not absolute. HI argues that, while institutions often appear stable, they are continually shaped by underlying tensions and conflicts among political actors. These latent struggles can serve as permissive conditions *changing the underlying context to increase the causal power of agency or contingency* (Soifer, 2012, p. 1574), thereby opening a critical juncture: periods of significant disruption triggered by shocks such as economic crises, military conflicts, or technological changes (Hacker and Pierson, 2014, p. 656).

Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, p.348) define *critical juncture* as follows:

...relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest. By 'relatively short periods of time,' we mean that the duration of the juncture must be brief relative to the duration of the path-dependent process it instigates (which leads eventually to the outcome of interest). By 'substantially heightened probability,' we mean that the probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest must be high relative to that probability before and after the juncture.

However, the options available to actors are not unlimited. As Capoccia (2016) argues, contingency at critical junctures is bounded—actors make real choices, but only within a limited possibilities set shaped by historical trajectories, existing institutional arrangements, and current political dynamics. In other words, while critical junctures loosen path dependency and expand the space for agent choices, the scope for change remains constrained by institutional legacies (path dependency), the prevailing political context, and power struggles among competing actors. These forces interact to shape both the direction and the limits of change. During such junctures, political actors may attempt to introduce new norms, reconfigure governance structures, or redistribute power, thereby setting new institutional paths and institutionalizing their advantages, which become reinforced over time (Capoccia, 2016; Avelino, 2017; Roberts and Geels, 2019). Isomorphic pressures may push actors towards widely accepted solutions, while ideological contestation and asymmetrical power relationships may restrict more transformative reforms (Capoccia, 2016). The influence of agency within bounded conditions is further mediated by productive conditions, the factors that shape the intended outcome after a critical juncture has been opened (Soifer, 2012). The international, national, and subnational dimensions each exert distinct yet interconnected pressures that shape how innovations are initiated and implemented over time (Cinar et al., 2024a). In some cases, these shifts result only in incremental adjustments to innovation priorities, for instance, following landmark elections in soft-authoritarian regimes where formal changes occur without altering deeper institutional logics (Cinar et al., 2024b).

2.3. Multilevel political contexts, power, agency, and public sector innovation

A political context, comprising institutionalized power relationships between actors (Thelen, 1999), critically determines the nature of PSI (Suchitwarasan et al., 2024). Characterized by power struggles and resource negotiations across governance levels, this context can either facilitate or constrain innovation (Cinar et al., 2024a). Power, as the capacity to shape decisions, allocate resources, and influence institutional behaviors (Peters et al., 2005), plays a pivotal role in shaping innovation priorities, while operating across multiple levels: international, national, and subnational. Power is critical in setting priorities for innovation and allocating resources for the implementation of innovations.

An HI perspective strengthens this analysis by foregrounding two critical insights. First, power must be understood as unfolding over time: long-term processes of political contestation, adaptation, and institutionalization are essential to revealing how certain coalitions gain enduring influence. Second, core institutional and policy arrangements typically advance the interests of specific political coalitions by embedding their preferences into governance structures. This institutionalization of advantage often occurs during critical junctures or through subtle mechanisms such as agenda control, anticipated reactions, or the exclusion of alternatives from public discourse (Pierson, 2016). These mechanisms make power appear neutral and technocratic, masking its political character and reproducing inequalities beneath the surface. As Pierson notes, “a systematic analysis of political power relationships must focus on how institutional arrangements advance particular political coalitions’ interests” (Pierson, 2016, p. 124). Thus, innovation processes, often framed as managerial or evidence-based, should instead be recognized as sites of political struggle shaped by historically entrenched power dynamics. This reframing calls for a temporal and structural lens that is attentive to how policy regimes are both outcomes of past power struggles and instruments for reinforcing them.

Further, power is unevenly distributed across different levels of a political context (Geels, 2004). The international level comprises factors driven by global forces and international relationships; these include international agreements, geopolitical rivalries, supranational organizations (e.g., the EU, the World Bank), and transnational challenges such as climate change and migration (Hantrais, 2008). Through funding mechanisms, governance frameworks, and policy agendas, external isomorphic pressures often reflect the interests of powerful global actors, shaping domestic innovation priorities to align with international norms and standards (Fioretos, 2011). Agreements or power shifts at the international level exert top-down pressures on both national and subnational actors, creating windows of opportunity for innovation. Serot (2002) argues that these powerful international forces, encompassing technological progress and supranational regulatory frameworks, can counterbalance or even overshadow national institutions’ influences on policy outcomes. Also, as Pierson (2016) highlights, *ideational power* allows dominant international powers to shape perceptions of what is politically legitimate, possible, or desirable, not through coercion, but by embedding particular worldviews, values, and policy paradigms into discourse, education, and international aid frameworks. This underscores the importance of considering international pressures in the analysis of PSI.

The national-level political context concerns ideological legacies, party systems, forms of representation, and the distribution of power among political, bureaucratic, and societal groups (Hantrais, 2008). These structures condition the possibilities for innovation by defining regulatory boundaries, resource allocation patterns, and the coherence of long-term state visions (Geels, 2004). A stable political environment that supports innovation initiatives can therefore be conducive to PSI. Crucially, these arrangements are not neutral; they are the product of historically embedded power relationships that continue to shape

governance trajectories (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Rather than being solely reactive to pressures or strategic opportunities, national political systems often incorporate inherited logics that filter how external stimuli are internalized. The re-scaling of governance, where competencies shift between local, national, and international levels, typically reflects pre-existing institutional logics and entrenched patterns of authority (Hameiri, 2020). Conversely, critical junctures such as political revolutions can redistribute power (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2001).

The subnational political context encompasses the political structures, processes, and entities that function at levels below the central government in a country. The extent of autonomy and authority granted to regional and local bodies relative to the center characterize the political context at this level (Hantrais, 2008). At the subnational level, institutional arrangements and historically rooted power dynamics significantly influence the implementation of innovations (Cinar et al., 2024a). Rather than serving as neutral conduits for central policy, subnational contexts are shaped by longstanding institutional legacies that condition the capacities for implementing innovations. The ways in which innovations unfold at this level are filtered through existing authority structures, bureaucratic traditions, and locally embedded power relationships (Akgün et al., 2024; Fred and Mukhtar-Landgren, 2024). Such arrangements reflect the historically evolved power structures that allow local actors to engage strategically with governance reforms, adopting or resisting changes based on their priorities and capacities (Cruse et al., 2024). Further, historical distributions of power at the regional level can create varying capacities for PSI, as some local areas possess strong innovation capabilities while others remain constrained (Gullmark and Clausen, 2022).

While the (multilevel) political context structures the environment in which innovation occurs, agency and its choices remain an important yet bounded force in this landscape (Capoccia, 2016). Institutional arrangements not only distribute authority, but also shape the repertoires of actions available to political actors and coalitions (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). In this context, agency does not imply unconstrained decision-making; instead, it denotes the capacities of actors, often operating in coalitions, to interpret, contest, and sometimes reshape institutional logics from within. These coalitions may emerge among bureaucrats, political elites, civil society organizations, or transnational networks, and their influences are mediated by their positional power, historical legacies, and access to resources (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). Rather than being uniformly distributed, agency is often concentrated in actors embedded in dominant institutional pathways, allowing them to institutionalize advantage (Pierson, 2016).

Overall, a multilevel perspective on political context, agency, and power highlights that innovation processes are not simply technocratic decisions; instead, they are shaped by contingent political struggles across different levels, each with its own priorities, resources, and legacies. It is crucial to recognize these interplays if one is to understand how critical junctures and major shifts in a political context can realign power in ways that either accelerate or impede PSI.

3. Methodology, data, and coding procedures

This study employs a critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) approach to examine the roles of political context in PSI in Ukraine. We selected the CIS method for its capacity to integrate qualitative insights with a systematic search and to remedy the tensions between the positivist assumptions of the systematic review method and the interpretive assumptions posited by qualitative research (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006a). This interpretive and reflexive approach is particularly crucial and distinctive in two key phases of our review process.

First, the CIS method adopts a more iterative and dynamic approach, and allows research questions to evolve throughout the review process (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006b); in contrast, a conventional systematic review starts with clearly focused research questions (Snyder, 2019; Lim et al., 2022). This flexibility is particularly beneficial when addressing

complex and multifaceted topics, because it enables a research question to remain responsive to emerging patterns and theoretical insights identified in the literature during the review process (Kazimierczak et al., 2013; Gullmark and Clausen, 2022). In line with this approach, our review started with a preliminary research question to understand the roles of all the national context elements proposed by Cinar et al. (2024a). However, as the screening of abstracts and coding progressed, it became clear that most of the articles focused primarily on the roles of political context in PSI, while other national context elements received limited attention. We therefore decided to refine and narrow our research question to focus solely on political context's roles.

We utilized the Web of Science database to identify relevant academic sources, because it provides access to more than 34,000 journals and enables a systematic and efficient search process while conveniently applying our inclusion criteria (Clarivate, 2024a). Our search strategy included two sets of terms. The first set² included terms relating to innovation and the public sector context. We opted to use a second set of search terms to identify additional papers on PSI rather than contacting experts via e-mail, following the approach of Cinar et al. (2024b), who emphasize the latest innovative trends alongside terms relating to the public sector. We systematically adopted and applied these inclusion criteria throughout the review process:

1. *Period*: We implemented a year period criterion of 1991 to 2023 for our search to capture all relevant studies from Ukraine's independence in 1991 up to its invasion by Russia in 2022. We excluded papers that analyzed innovation under war conditions following the invasion.
2. *Publication quality*: To adopt a quality criterion, we selected the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) on Web of Science and included only articles published in journals indexed in the SSCI. The SSCI implements various selection criteria (Clarivate, 2024b), including peer review, ensuring that the included articles meet high academic standards.
3. *Language*: We searched and included only articles published in English.
4. *Field*: We included articles that studied a PSI activity. We define the public sector in accordance with the OECD (2008): "The public sector comprises the general government sector plus all public corporations including the central bank." We also adopt Cinar et al.'s (2024b, p.2) definition of PSI: "the adoption, creation or development of ideas, objects and practices that are new to the unit of adoption."
5. *Topic*: The article should discuss the political context along with the innovation activities.
6. *Study design*: We included qualitative and quantitative studies on Ukraine

The application of criteria 1 to 3 on Web of Science returned 1082 academic articles. We screened these articles' titles and abstracts according to criterion 4 to select studies on any innovative activities in Ukraine's public sector. This resulted in 280 articles for the next phase, during which the articles were shared among the research team so as to read the articles in full. The 84 articles that were then selected for full

review and data extraction met criterion 5 by studying a novel initiative in Ukraine's public sector as well as elements of political context in Ukraine. Fig. 1 outlines the systematic search and the inclusion/exclusion process.

Second, CIS fits well when the review corpus is heterogeneous. To deal with this heterogeneity, CIS employs interpretive data extraction, analysis, and synthesis (Flemming, 2010). As our review corpus consists of qualitative and quantitative articles from different disciplines, this approach helped us to synthesize an argument for our research questions. The primary aim of data extraction in CIS is to identify the themes in the reviewed articles and to formulate a synthesizing argument through developing a theoretical framework (Depraetere et al., 2021). This requires an abductive approach in which initial knowledge of the literature informs the reading and extraction of first-order codes from the review corpus. Understanding the findings and discussions in the reviewed articles then leads to the identification of patterns and the integration of initial codes under second-order concepts. Finally, further reading and reflexivity, guided by existing theories, help explain the phenomenon under investigation and result in the development of final aggregated third-order concepts (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006b).

CIS also presents findings in a narrative format rather than relying on statistical reporting. This approach emphasizes the importance of context and interpretation, allowing for a more nuanced and flexible presentation of the results and providing a platform for detailed explanations (Flemming, 2010). This is particularly beneficial when dealing with multifaceted and context-dependent topics (Moat et al., 2013). The narrative format also promotes reflexivity and upholds the authorial voice, because it encourages researchers to critically engage with the literature corpus and actively reflect on their interpretations (Kazimierczak et al., 2013). This reflexive engagement ensures that the synthesis process remains iterative and responsive to the emerging insights throughout the review, as well as a contextually rich understanding of the research topic. Finally, the relationships between the third-order concepts should be synthesized into a conceptual framework that considers the contextual understanding (Depraetere et al., 2021), as implemented and presented in Fig. 2.

Following this data extraction approach, the first author systematically coded the articles using NVivo 12, ensuring consistency in the coding process, as recommended by Criado et al. (2023). Coding decisions and interpretations were regularly discussed in research meetings with the other team members to maintain rigor and coherence. In each study, we extracted the innovation project(s) and their priorities, the year(s) an innovation was introduced or implemented, and the elements of the political context. To identify the elements of the political context, we initially coded the terms directly used in the articles as first-order codes, following the approach outlined by Gullmark and Clausen (2022). We then analyzed these first-order codes to identify recurring patterns, which were subsequently organized into second-order concepts. Building on this, we developed third-order dimensions to conceptualize the elements of the political context. In parallel, we sought and identified critical junctures in line with Cinar et al.'s (2024b) findings on critical junctures and accordingly grouped the innovation priorities into three distinct periods based on the revolutionary transitions in Ukraine's political context (see Appendices 1 and 2). To maintain conceptual and empirical distinctions between explanatory and outcome variables, we employed separate coding strategies for the political context and the innovation priorities during our document analysis. We coded the political context based on structural features, actor-related dynamics, and historical legacies. These dimensions were used to assess the conditions in which innovation was enabled or constrained. In contrast, the innovation priorities were identified through the presence of explicit government focus areas that received targeted innovation efforts, typically articulated in reform programs, policy declarations, or strategy plans. Coding criteria included (a) named innovation initiatives or agendas, (b) the allocation of innovation resources, and (c) the explicit framing of these efforts as innovations.

² ("innov*") AND ("municipal*" OR "public administrat*" OR "public organization*" OR "public management" OR "government*" OR "public service" OR "local government*" OR "public sphere" OR "public sector" OR administrative*) AND "Ukraine*".

³ ("New Public Management" OR "NPM" OR "reform" OR "governance" OR "co-creation" OR "modernis*" OR "e-government" OR "smart cit*" OR "artificial intelligence" OR "AI" OR "big data") AND ("municipal*" OR "public administrat*" OR "public organization*" OR "public management" OR "government*" OR "public service" OR "local government*" OR "public sphere" OR "public sector" OR "administrative*") AND "Ukraine*".

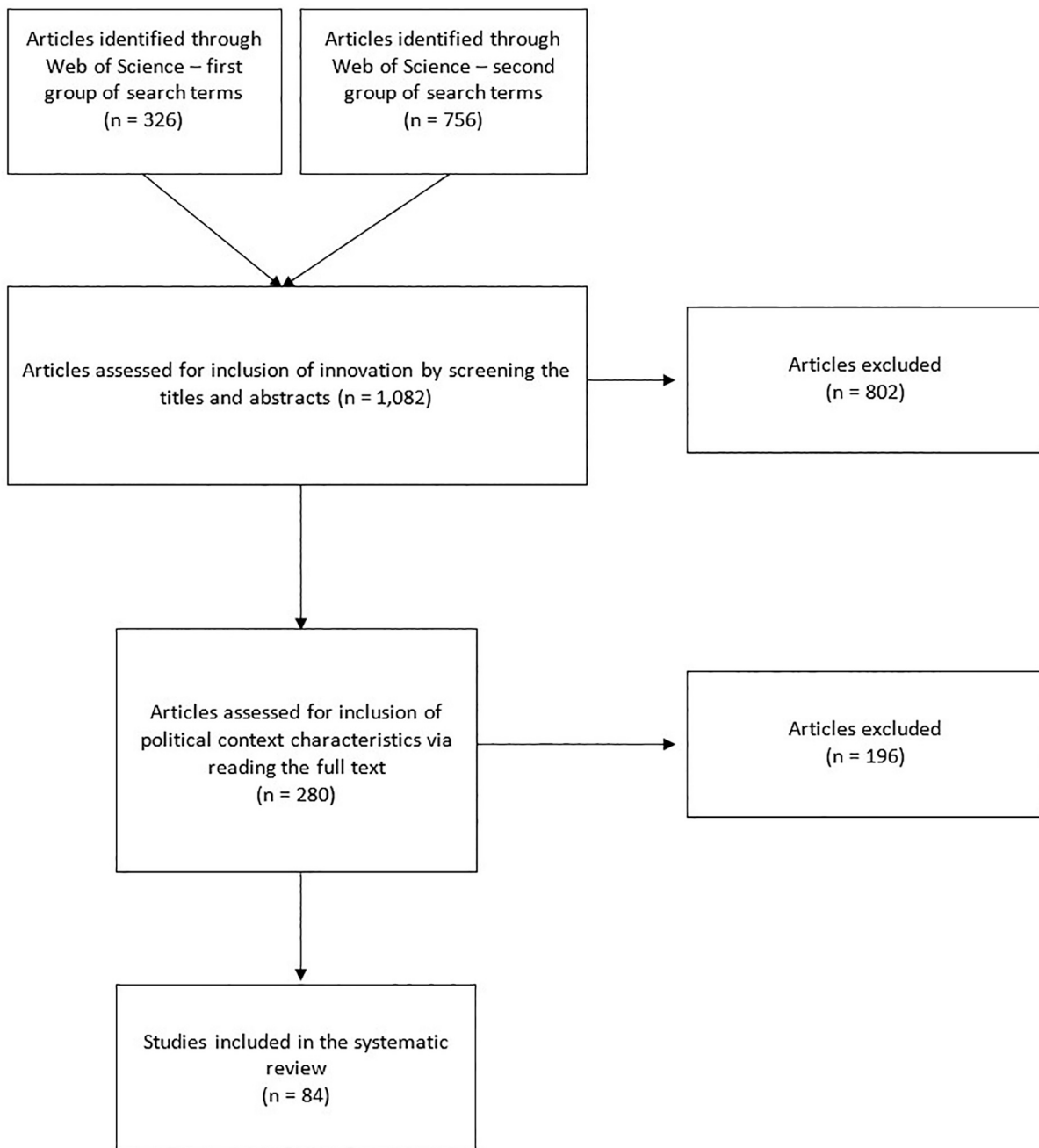


Fig. 1. Systematic review process.

To uncover the relationships between Level 2 categories and innovation priorities, we conducted an interpretive analysis (see [Appendix 3](#)) that revealed how the political context shapes the formation and trajectory of innovation priorities through underlying mechanisms such as path dependencies, power struggles, and critical junctures. These insights were synthesized into a multilevel conceptual framework ([Depraetere et al., 2021](#)) (see [Fig. 2](#)), which illustrates how different levels of the political context interact over time to influence innovation pathways.

While it is acknowledged that CIS inherently limits reproducibility ([Moat et al., 2013](#)), we transparently report our search, review, and data extraction steps. Nonetheless, our CIS has limitations, similar to those of previous reviews (e.g., [Cinar et al., 2019](#); [Gullmark and Clausen, 2022](#)). First, we included only academic articles. Some influential contributions

from the field might have been published as academic books or in news articles not included in our synthesis. Second, our synthesis is based on our interpretation of the research findings. While members of the research team have been involved in systematic and integrative review processes and are familiar with the Ukraine context, this subjective data extraction is a limitation. Further, we sought to keep our search terms as broad as possible to include studies from various disciplines. However, there might be academic articles on novel initiatives that use different terms in their titles, abstracts, and keywords, and therefore might not have been captured through our search strategy. Finally, given the challenging nature of primary data collection under the current war conditions in Ukraine, conducting interviews with policymakers or innovators, or directly observing innovation projects, was not feasible at this time.

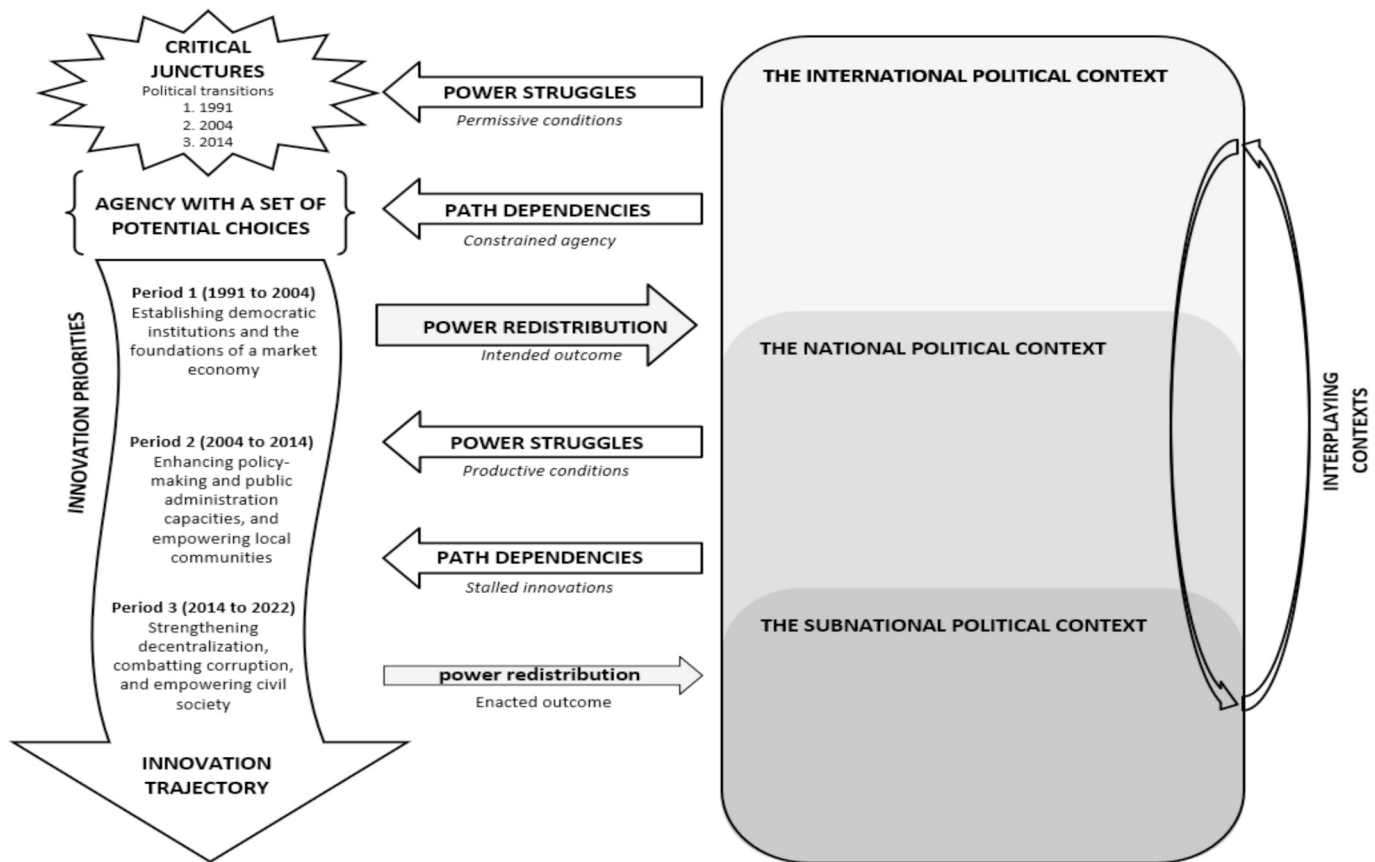


Fig. 2. Innovation priorities, critical junctures, agency, interplaying contexts, the redistribution of power, and path dependencies.

4. Results

This section presents the results of two analyses. First, we sought to understand the innovation priorities in Ukraine over time. Thus, we present the innovation activity/ies studied in each article⁴ and the year (s) that the innovation(s) was (were) introduced or implemented (see Appendix 1). Second, we analyzed three periods that aligned with critical junctures in the political context to understand the innovation priorities' trajectories as well as how international, national, and subnational political contexts influenced innovation priorities and the implementation of innovations over time. Appendix 2 presents an overview over our main findings from the 84 articles on the roles of political context in PSI in Ukraine, while Appendix 3 presents the results of our interpretive analysis of the relationships between Level 2 categories and innovation priorities, illustrating how the political context shaped the formations and trajectories of these priorities through dynamics such as path dependencies, power struggles, and critical junctures.

4.1. Innovation priorities

The reviewed articles collectively indicate three distinct periods of innovation priorities aligned with critical junctures in Ukraine's political context. The coding reveals that innovation priorities in Period 1 (1991 to 2004) primarily focused on establishing democratic institutions including the new Constitution, the Parliament (Wise and Brown, 1996), the Treasury (Vakulenko, 2022), and the Accounting Chamber of Ukraine (Slobodyanik and Chyzhevskaya, 2019), as well as the adoption of

self-government status by towns and villages and the allocation of new resources to them (Swianiewicz, 2006; Leitch, 2017). Second, innovation priorities focused on Ukraine's transition from a centrally-planned Soviet economy to an independent state striving for economic liberalization and laying the foundations for a free market economy. Notable examples include a new tax system designed to modernize fiscal policies (Fischer-Smith, 2018) and the privatization of state-owned assets, which aimed to redistribute economic resources and stimulate private enterprise (Kudelia, 2012).

In Period 2 (2004 to 2014), innovation priorities primarily centered around developing public administration and policymaking capacities as well as around empowering local communities. Reform initiatives to strengthen democratic institutions such as election reforms were still evident. Capacity-building initiatives focused on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration. For instance, the National Training System for Civil Servants sought to enhance the skills and knowledge of public sector personnel (Goncharuk et al., 2021). The adoption of new policy innovations such as the Technical Regulation on Standards for Industrial Products (Langbein and Wolczuk, 2012) and Environmental Governance aimed to align Ukraine's policymaking system with European standards. Similarly, organizational innovations in public finance, such as the Public Finance Modernization Project (Bedianashvili et al., 2019), were designed to strengthen technical and administrative capacities. At the same time, empowering local communities became a cornerstone of innovation priorities during this period. The New Community Partnership Model via Twinning exemplified this approach by promoting collaborations between local governments, NGOs, and international partners (Panchuk, 2019; Shyrokykh, 2019).

In Period 3 (between 2014 and 2022), the innovation intensity significantly increased, and innovation priorities shifted towards advancing decentralization, transparency, co-creation, civic

⁴ Some articles studied more than one innovation priority; for instance, Slukhai et al. (2019) studied decentralization and transparency.

participation, and digital transformation. First, decentralization became a key focus, supporting the redistribution of administrative responsibilities and resources to local governments as well as encouraging amalgamations that benefit from economies of scale (Wright and Slukhai, 2021).

Decentralization was the most studied innovation priority coded in our review, and 25 articles investigated various innovative elements of Ukraine's decentralization. Further, innovative means of civic participation and co-creation were sought through initiatives such as electronic petitions (Turkot et al., 2022) and the Diia electronic government platform (Kud, 2023). Second, transparency and anticorruption priorities were also at the forefront during this period. The second most studied innovation priority was transparency, and 16 studies investigated different aspects of anticorruption efforts and their impacts. Initiatives such as the ProZorro e-Procurement System introduced an open and competitive public procurement digital platform (Kaletnik and Zdyrko, 2019), while the Transparent Cities Program (Mazepus et al., 2021) sought to empower citizens to transparently monitor government corruption.

Our analysis shows that, although innovation priorities varied across the examined periods, they consistently built on previously established foundations. For instance, innovations in Period 2 sought to further strengthen the democratic institutions established in Period 1 while introducing enhanced local governance capacities. Building on these redistributions of power, the innovation priorities in Period 3 sought to translate these capabilities into broader structural changes, particularly through the implementation of large-scale decentralization reforms. Similarly, innovation priorities relating to establishing a free market economy such as the adoption of a public-private partnership (PPP) procurement model in Period 2 and the establishment of the new land property market in Period 3 showed some continuity across the three periods. However, the full realization of the intended priorities were conditioned by power struggles and path dependencies in all three periods. We will now address the impacts of the political context and its transitions.

4.2. The roles of the political context

4.2.1. Establishing democratic institutions and market economy foundations (Period 1: 1991 to 2004)

4.2.1.1. The international political context. The protracted power struggle between the West and the Soviet Union culminated in the collapse of the latter in 1991. This transition in the political context marked a critical juncture for innovation in Ukraine. Our review reveals that the international political context has had crucial impacts on innovation in Ukraine's public sector in Period 1 (1991 to 2004), when Ukraine started developing relationships with Western countries and intergovernmental organizations. While this transition in the institutional setting created opportunities for innovation through financial aid and knowledge transfers, it also exposed Ukraine to external pressures that redefined roles, redistributed power, and sparked legitimacy conflicts.

On the one hand, various financial aid programs (alongside knowledge and technical transfer initiatives supported by the U.S., European countries, and Western international organizations) aimed to help establish a new Ukrainian state through reform and innovation. The primary innovation priorities during this period (see Appendix 1) focused on building democratic institutions and laying the foundations for a market-oriented economy. For instance, Ukraine's newly founded Parliament was supported by financial and technical assistance by the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation, and Indiana University in 1994 (Wise and Brown, 1996). Other examples include the U.S. Freedom Support Act (FSA), which promoted the transition to a free market and democratic reforms (Barrett, 2018); USAID assistance for democratic local governance

(Blair, 2000); and the UK's Know How Fund to facilitate the transition to a free market in banking and finance as well as the privatization of state-owned real estate and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (Leitch, 2019). Similarly, the IMF and the World Bank supported the establishment of an institutional framework for the operation of Ukraine's State Treasury through donations and technical expertise (Vakulenko, 2022). Ukraine's first official agreement with the EU, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), was signed in 1994 and served as the framework for providing Ukraine with technical and financial assistance from the EU (Rabinovych, 2024).

On the other hand, the international political context reinforced Ukraine's alignment with the Western power base to institutionalize its advantages, exposing the country to external dependencies. External pressures drove significant redistribution of power through the reallocation of resources in Ukraine's economy. Simultaneously, the introduction of democratic institutions and market-oriented reforms redefined the roles of state actors, civil society, and private enterprises. The international assistance provided to Ukraine in the 1990s has been criticized on the grounds that the aid adopted a short-term and fragmented approach via projectification (Harmer et al., 2013). Further, the innovation priorities focused on free market reform and privatization instead of developing capacities in the post-Soviet public administration (Leitch, 2019), with only a limited number of examples of capacity development initiatives (Hague et al., 1995; Dolowitz et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the groundwork laid during Period 1 established a foundation for further innovation in subsequent periods, despite the challenges posed by post-Soviet politico-administrative path dependencies in the national context, which we will now discuss.

4.2.1.2. The national political context. Our review reveals that Ukraine's national political context strongly influenced innovation priorities and their implementation during Period 1. These impacts were shaped by the ideological and political shift towards a free market economy, the fluid political environment, and rent-seeking behaviors among political elites and oligarchs. First, the national political context experienced an ideological shift from communism, where the state was the most powerful actor (and controlled the economy, media, and civil society) to capitalism, which promotes a more balanced distribution of power among free markets, economic liberalization, the tax regime, and independent civil organizations. On the one hand, this transition in the institutional setting drove significant innovations, including the new Constitution based on the separation of powers (Hague et al., 1995), the privatization of state-controlled industries and estates (Umantsiv et al., 2019), and new treasury and public finance systems (Vakulenko, 2022). On the other hand, the path dependency on communism, often described in the literature as *post-Soviet*, limited PSI as power remained concentrated in the state and the Soviet ideal of a central public administration remained influential. After independence, Ukraine faced significant challenges in establishing genuine democratic institutions, the rule of law, and a political culture of pluralism and civic participation (Wise and Brown, 1996). Further, the planned economy model of the Soviet Union left Ukraine with a highly centralized and industrialized economic structure dominated by heavy industry and agricultural sectors (Kubicek, 2009). While actors introduced key reforms, their scopes for action were shaped by weak administrative capacity and the inherited centralized control.

Second, the fluid political context, marked by a trade-off between political turmoil and stability, played a key role in the successful implementations of innovations during Period 1, when political willingness was consistently demonstrated. For instance, the Single Tax policy innovation introduced in 1998 was politically endorsed by President Kuchma, whose executive authority created enabling conditions for its adoption (Fischer-Smith, 2018). However, this should be regarded as authoritarian support for reform by the head of a strong presidency system and "a host of more informal powers to reward supporters and punish those that deviated from his preferences" (Kubicek, 2009, p.326).

Third, rent-seeking behaviors among political elites and oligarchs began to hinder the implementation of innovations. At the start, the transition to a market economy was challenging owing to structural path dependencies; it was a slow process marked by economic decline in the initial years (Blair, 2000; Kudelia, 2012). In this context, a key element of Ukraine's politico-economic system emerged: oligarchs. Although oligarchs have their roots in the economic liberalization enacted under Gorbachev's leadership of the Soviet Union, the rapid and often non-transparent privatization of state-owned assets, which was an innovation priority in Period 1, allowed certain individuals to acquire significant power by gaining control over lucrative industries (Blair, 2000). The underdeveloped regulatory environment in this period promoted rent-seeking and allowed oligarchs to exploit the redistribution of power and to consolidate their positions. The oligarchs' power base grew through corrupt practices and sometimes illegal activities in Period 1 (Hague et al., 1995).

4.2.1.3. The subnational political context. The subnational political context is also highlighted by the reviewed articles as a significant factor that influenced PSI during Period 1, shaped by the centralized power structure and the regionally varied ethnic composition. First, power in Ukraine has historically been concentrated centrally. Ukraine is a unitary state; that is, while there are regional and local governmental bodies, significant political and administrative authority for resource allocation resides with the central government. The regional and local political contexts have long depended on the Soviet structures and legacies (Kuts et al., 2021), where the executive heads of regions (governors) are appointed by the central government, while mayors and councils of local governments are selected through local elections (Swianiewicz, 2006). Second, while debates surrounding transfers of power to regions and districts began in the years following Ukraine's independence and were supported by international donors (Blair, 2000), any innovation priority aimed at decentralization was hindered in Period 1 by the fear that the different ethnic compositions of Ukraine's regions would lead to separatism (Leitch, 2017). Thus, our review identified only a limited number of innovation priorities relating to the subnational context during Period 1, such as the adoption of self-government status by local governments (Swianiewicz, 2006) and initial attempts to establish democratic local governance (Blair, 2000).

4.2.2. Enhancing public administration and policymaking capacity while empowering local communities (Period 2: 2004 to 2014)

4.2.2.1. The international political context. The power struggle between the West and Russia over Ukraine's political orientation in the early 2000s culminated in the Orange Revolution, which was triggered by allegations of electoral fraud favoring the pro-Russia candidate Viktor Yanukovich in 2004. The subsequent re-run election in early 2005 resulted in a victory for the pro-West candidate Viktor Yushchenko. This period marked a critical juncture in Ukraine's political trajectory (for further details, see Section 4.2.2.2). This transition in the political setting opened a new period of innovation priorities. During Period 2 (2004 to 2014), innovation priorities focused on improving public administration and policymaking capabilities as well as strengthening local communities and NGOs. Our review also suggests that innovations focused on establishing democratic institutions and free markets continued to be a priority during this period, following the path created in Period 1.

In Period 2, Ukraine's PSI was strongly influenced by the international political context through increased financial aid supporting integration into the West; Ukraine's involvement with the EU in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP); rising Russian influence; and the fragmented, normative, and short-sighted approaches of some Western partners. First, increased aid from the U.S. and the EU supported a *de-Sovietising the government* narrative to innovate and to

develop capabilities in public administration following the Orange Revolution. For instance, while a second treasury project by the World Bank in 2008 involved various innovations in fiscal management, it ultimately faced implementation challenges and was not successfully completed (Vakulenko, 2022). Also, a PPP procurement model was adopted in 2010 (Baranovska et al., 2022) and the new National Training System for Civil Servants was introduced in 2010 (Goncharuk et al., 2021). Further examples include healthcare reforms supported by the EU (Dolowitz et al., 2020) and higher education reforms that included the adoption of the Bologna Principles (Osipian, 2014).

Second, the EU-Ukraine Action Plan in the ENP was adopted in February 2005; it offered Ukraine the possibility of participating in key aspects of the EU's internal market but imposed innovations in the areas of transparency, civic participation, and democratization. Between 2005 and 2010, electoral reforms aimed at democratization were introduced in a top-down way (Casier, 2011). However, persistent implementation challenges since 1991 prompted international donors to involve NGOs in innovation projects. These initiatives aligned with the political will of Ukraine's citizens to integrate into Europe, as manifested during the Orange Revolution (Barrett, 2018; Kuruppu et al., 2023; Mützelburg, 2023). For instance, in 2007 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiated a community development project in Ukraine to empower rural NGOs to engage with local governments (Kvartiuk and Curtiss, 2019). Similarly, the Global Fund provided grants to Ukrainian NGOs to facilitate HIV-related policy innovations (Harmer et al., 2013). The EU's transgovernmental network scheme under the Twinning Projects label also facilitated international cooperation (Shyrokykh, 2019). Panchuk (2019) reported that Ukraine implemented the highest number of Twinning projects under the ENP between 2007 and 2016.

Third, the pendulum of the power struggle in the international political context swung in favor of Russia during the 2010 to 2014 period. The pro-Russia presidency of Yanukovich exemplified a contrasting influence of international political context as, during his term, Russia supported illiberal and non-democratic Ukrainian elites through financial assistance and used Russia-sponsored NGOs to cultivate Russia-friendly attitudes among Ukraine's citizens (Barrett, 2018, p.89). These hostile conditions for innovation led innovation projects such as environmental auditing supported by Europe and the U.S. to stagnate (Ruban and Rydén, 2019). EU Association Agreement negotiations in 2013 triggered a political crisis and brought Period 2 to an end (Duleba, 2022).

In short, innovation projects in Period 2 achieved the redistribution of power as well as the empowerment of local communities and civic society to only limited extents. Some scholars point to the international political context and suggest that the assistance programs sponsored by Western countries that focused on municipalities, regions, and NGOs were not well connected. Scholars also suggest that the short-term nature of these efforts failed to address the complex problems in Ukraine (Harmer et al., 2013; Leitch, 2017). Another criticism of international efforts for innovation in Period 2 is that they relied on normative frameworks and ideational power such as New Public Management without considering adaptations to the context of Ukraine (Vakulenko, 2022).

4.2.2.2. The national political context. The national political context of Ukraine strongly influenced innovation priorities and their implementation in Period 2 through political turmoil, growing civic participation, and oligarchs' exploitation of the redistribution of power associated with innovations. First, following the Orange Revolution in 2004, which emerged as mass protests in response to the presidential election initially won by the pro-Russia candidate Yanukovich, Ukraine entered a phase of political turmoil. While the country's Supreme Court annulled the original election results and the pro-West candidate Yushchenko won the re-run in 2005, the period between 2005 and 2010 was marked by a fragile coalition government and tensions both within coalition parties and between the government and the president. Such

ongoing national-level political instability hindered the continuity of the implementation of innovations (Casier, 2011; Langbein and Wolczuk, 2012). For instance, Vakulenko (2022) notes that political instability disrupted the interactions between international financial institutions and the Ministry of Finance, constraining the scopes and continuities of public entrepreneurs' efforts to advance public financial management reforms. Similarly, Vakulenko et al. (2020) suggest that the frequently-changing governments in this period blocked the implementation of healthcare reforms. This was exacerbated by the election of the pro-Russia politician Yanukovych in 2010 (as discussed in the previous section).

Second, the role of civic participation had a growing influence on PSI during Period 2, reflecting significant developments in Ukraine's national context. The increasing involvement of citizens and NGOs was not solely a result of international donors seeking to improve democratic governance (Burlyuk and Shapovalova, 2017); it also stemmed from a domestic movement seeking to combat corruption and oligarchs resistant to change, post-Soviet institutions, and patronage networks that were pervasive at all levels of government (Mazepus et al., 2021; Mützelburg, 2023). Civil society played a pivotal role in forming an anti-corruption coalition, which strongly contributed to the grassroots momentum that culminated in the Orange Revolution in 2004 (Kudelia, 2012). This revolution was a manifestation of the Ukrainian people's growing desire for democratic change and transparency, highlighting how national civic participation influenced PSI by challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for reforms from within the country. As a result of this internal momentum, NGOs and local communities gained increased prominence and became central foci of Western aid initiatives (Kvartiuk and Curtiss, 2019).

Finally, the power imbalance in shaping political decisions continued to favor oligarchs and business interests during Period 2, often impeding proposed innovations to combat corruption. For instance, the reform of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) faced challenges owing to resistance from vested interests seeking to maintain their influences over these entities (Kudelia, 2012; Barrett, 2018). From a different perspective, Panchuk (2019) empirically found that Twinning projects were more successful in policy sectors with fewer political or commercial conflicts of interest. These findings highlight how internal political dynamics impacted the success of Ukraine's PSI in this period.

4.2.2.3. The subnational political context. In this period, the power imbalances in the subnational political context were significantly challenged by innovation priorities aimed at empowering local communities and facilitating citizen participation; however, path-dependent power conflicts and patronage networks still continued to constrain progress. The informal levers of power nested between oligarchs and corrupted local elites represented a lasting legacy that hindered the implementation of innovations in regions, cities, and towns (Kubicek, 2009; Langbein and Wolczuk, 2012), largely owing to the extensive patronage networks established by oligarchs (Mazepus et al., 2021). These regional and local power networks were also closely connected to the central patronage networks built under the governing political party (Kudelia, 2012), as many oligarchs were appointed as regional governors (Mazepus et al., 2021).

Considering the influx of international financial aid for innovation, the exploitation of opportunities created by the redistribution of power became more pronounced during this period; for instance, mayors actively participated in the formation of rural NGOs to access EU-funded projects that required the existence of such organizations. According to Kvartiuk and Curtiss (2019), in approximately 30 % of instances, mayors took on the role of chairpersons, while in the remaining cases they examined, mayors were either directly involved in establishing the organizations or delegated the responsibility to other members of the village council. This approach ultimately led to a rural development type that lacked genuine community participation. Similarly, participatory

budgeting-related innovations supported by international donors were dominated by local elites, who benefited from international visits and further strengthened their influences in local policymaking by manipulating new participatory budgeting processes; in contrast, ordinary citizens were not actively involved in these innovation projects (Kuruppu et al., 2023).

4.2.3. Strengthening decentralization, combatting corruption, and empowering civil society (Period 3: 2014 to 2022)

4.2.3.1. The international political context. Period 3 began with another revolutionary transition in Ukraine's national political context, intertwined with the power struggles in the international political context between the West and Russia. This transition was marked by the critical juncture of the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, which followed the Euromaidan protests that erupted in 2013 in response to the Ukraine government's decision to suspend an association agreement with the EU in favor of closer ties with Russia. Period 3 (2014 to 2022) witnessed Ukraine's most intense PSI efforts, owing to the signed Association Agreement with the EU. It was also significantly shaped by the international political context through external political pressures to prioritize decentralization- and transparency-related innovations, as well as the provision of knowledge and financial support for implementation and the expanding operations of international NGOs.

The Association Agreement signed with the EU in 2015 included the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with Ukraine. This agreement imposed changes on a wide range of areas, including political institutions, human rights, the judiciary, corruption, the movement of people, foreign policy, security, market access to goods, trade protections, customs services, technical standards, food safety, public procurement, intellectual property rights, competition policy, and statistics (Predmestnikov and Gumenyuk, 2019). This broad and ambitious agenda triggered a significant number of innovations and financial support from the EU (Wolczuk, 2019). As a result, Ukraine's public sector experienced its most active innovation period until the invasion by Russia in 2022, and a significant number of the reviewed papers studied the decentralization- and transparency-oriented innovation priorities in this period, which represented a substantial attempt to redistribute power.

The majority of the reviewed articles point out the international influences on decentralization reforms during this period. First, the significant role played by the Association Agreement in decentralization reform was cited in a majority of the articles on this reform (e.g., Xin et al., 2021). Second, this reform's contents were impacted by the international political context; reform efforts drew on Poland's successful experience with decentralization, and Polish experts supervised the initiation of the reforms (Okunovska et al., 2020). Third, international donors transferred funds to enhance the capacities of NGOs and local governments to implement decentralization and enhance political participation (Barrett, 2018). For instance, the Polish-Ukrainian Cooperation Foundation, in collaboration with the Ukrainian NGO Social Boost, financially supported the introduction of digital participatory budgeting (Schmäing, 2023). While the EU considered these decentralization reforms as the most successful innovations enacted in Ukraine after 2014 (Dmytryshyn et al., 2021), Rabinovych and Gawrich (2023, p.1) criticize the international political context's influences on decentralization by highlighting that, despite the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, Western actors primarily approached decentralization as a governance issue rather than as a mechanism for peace.

The international political context also influenced innovation in Period 3 by prioritizing transparency. Foreign governments, intergovernmental organizations, and international NGOs considered corruption to be the most significant problem in Ukraine's public sector and imposed pressures to accelerate anticorruption reforms. Barrett (2018) reports from an interviewee that the U.S.'s then-Vice President Joe

Biden played a key role in urging President Petro Poroshenko to implement anticorruption measures. In a good example of the redistribution of power, the U.S. government also funded NGOs directly in order to support anticorruption reforms. The EU also provided funds to develop the capacity for ethical behaviors among civil servants (Barrett, 2018). However, international assistance for transparency-related innovation projects has faced significant criticism, particularly for adopting short-term approaches and employing ineffective evaluation methods, which have led to inaccurate claims of positive impacts (Leitch, 2017).

International NGOs' roles are also notable in Period 3 for promoting anticorruption-related innovations. For instance, Transparency International partnered with Transparency International Ukraine to facilitate public awareness campaigns and initiate the transparent public procurement platform ProZorro in 2015 (Kruglashov and Kostenko, 2021). Transparency International Ukraine also started the Transparent Cities program in 2017, publishing transparency and openness scores for cities (Mazepus et al., 2021). Further, intergovernmental institutions employed the official involvement and oversight of international experts over the enacting of transparency reforms, such as the establishment of the High Anti-Corruption Court. However, such attempts faced resistance from existing path dependencies in critical institutions and were considered a threat to judicial independence, leading Ukraine's Supreme Court to reverse these changes (Nekoliak, 2022).

In the articles we reviewed, there is also evidence of the influences of the international political context on other PSI activities during this period. For instance, USAID partnered with the Institute for Budget and Socio-Economic Research to introduce a new participatory budgeting concept to a municipality in order to strengthen grassroots democracy. However, the study found that this innovation focused on raising awareness among politicians and administrative staff, and that there was limited attention to empowering citizens. Thus, powerful members of existing local patronage networks dominated the participatory budgeting process supported by international donors, demonstrating the interplays between international and subnational political contexts (Kuruppu et al., 2023). Further, the conflict with Russia that erupted in 2014 in Crimea and other eastern regions created the need to accommodate 2 million internally displaced people. New integration initiatives were developed through engagement with international, national, and local government organizations as well as NGOs. The Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons was founded to coordinate these activities using a novel multi-governance approach (Sakhanienko et al., 2021). Finally, a civil service reform program was jointly supported by the EU and the OECD between 2014 and 2017. However, Samokhvalov and Strelkov (2021) concluded that these cross-dimensional networks between international and domestic high-level diplomats, politicians, technical experts, civil society actors, and media disappeared over time, resulting in declining political support for these innovations.

4.2.3.2. The national political context. The Revolution of Dignity strongly reshaped Ukraine's national political landscape. At the start of this period, political willingness and the rise of civic engagement, along with national NGOs engaging in transparency-related innovations, played significant roles in encouraging PSI. However, ongoing power conflicts and entrenched patronage networks again hindered these initiatives' success in later years.

The Euromaidan protests and power conflicts ultimately led to the resignation of then-President Yanukovich and the Revolution of Dignity (Khadzhyradieva et al., 2020). The revolution as a critical juncture facilitated political willingness for PSI (Tataryn, 2019). The new president, Petro Poroshenko, who was regarded as an oligarch (Mazepus et al., 2021), favored European integration, setting the stage for various reforms as the new government faced public expectations for rapid and tangible reforms (Barrett, 2018). Most of the innovation priorities and

projects studied by the articles we reviewed were triggered during Period 3 and were supported by Poroshenko's political willingness.

The Euromaidan protests that led to the Revolution of Dignity also resulted in a significant shift in political power dynamics, increasing civic activism's influence in Ukraine's political process (Udovychenko et al., 2017). This intensified civic activism played a central role in holding the government accountable and pushing for sustained reforms. Various civic organizations that emerged during and after the Revolution of Dignity have continued to shape the political discourse and to advocate for innovations in transparency and governance (Kruglashov and Kostenko, 2021). For instance, the Reanimation Package of Reforms, a civil society coalition comprising more than 80 NGOs and thinktanks, emerged as a platform, with experts, activists, and representatives of NGOs collaborating to oversee the implementation of key reforms. This coalition functioned through several working groups focused on specific reform areas. These working groups sought to draft legislative proposals, lobby for their adoption, and monitor their implementation, to ensure that reforms met the objectives of transparency, efficiency, and democratic governance. A sound explanation for the success of this organization highlights the interplays between the international and the national political contexts: "Russia's invasion of Ukraine's eastern region produced an unintended consequence: a common foreign enemy galvanized Ukrainian society" (Barrett, 2018, p.90).

As a result, the innovation priority of transparency became more significant in Period 3, and new institutions were founded to combat corruption (Odnolko et al., 2022). For instance, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) is an independent law enforcement agency that investigates corruption-related offenses committed by high-ranking public officials and entities. Other institutions established after 2015 are the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, and the High Anti-Corruption Court (Bondarenko et al., 2021; Nekoliak, 2022). Also, policy innovations such as the adoption of open government data and state property governance, the creation of corporate governance standards specifically for financial banks, and process innovations such as the electronic administration of VAT and electronic procurement platforms such as ProZorro were introduced as anticorruption measures (Kaletnik and Zdyrko, 2019; Umantsiv et al., 2019; Fedotov and Voloshyna, 2019).

Nonetheless, the initial public support for transparency reforms and the Euromaidan protests, which underscored the importance of civil society for bottom-up transparency change (Kruglashov and Kostenko, 2021), could not translate these efforts into transformational change. The impacts of these anticorruption and transparency innovations remained limited owing to deteriorating political willingness over time (Samokhvalov and Strelkov, 2021), resistance by the Constitutional Court, frequent changes to laws, reduced administrative capacities during the Covid-19 pandemic (Kivalov, 2021; Nekoliak, 2022), and, more importantly, the deep entrenchedness of corruption in many spheres of Ukraine's public life. Fedotov and Voloshyna (2019, 228) note that one of the main reasons for the anticorruption movement's limited success is "the widespread belief that the government simply does not work without corruption". Bondarenko et al. (2021) further report examples of turf battles preventing cooperation between anti-corruption organizations.

This deteriorating trust in politicians and in Ukraine's government created fertile ground for the rise of technocratic populism, "which positions itself beyond traditional political divides and stresses... the inclusion of outsiders to avoid political conflicts between factions of the established elites" (Viedrov, 2023, p.478). Volodymyr Zelensky successfully mobilized citizens' skepticism by promising direct democracy to reflect the general will of the people to combat corruption. This new depoliticization discourse conveyed a strong message by holding current political parties and institutions accountable for persistent national political conflicts, leading to the 2019 electoral success by Zelensky, a former comedian and television producer with no previous political

experience. His political willingness facilitated EU-guided innovations such as contract-based employment in the civil service, judicial reforms, the establishment of land property markets, and the launch of the Diia electronic government platform (Hedikova and Muzychenko, 2021). Most of these initiatives sought to redistribute power to reduce Russia's influence in Ukraine (Nekoliak, 2022). As the escalating power struggle between the West and Russia resulted in Ukraine being invaded by Russia in 2022, whether or not these reforms would have been successful cannot be determined.

4.2.3.3. The subnational political context. The subnational political context became a central arena for PSI during Period 3, largely shaped by a significant redistribution of power. However, this shift was mediated by persistent path dependencies, particularly those linked to patronage networks and entrenched local elites. The innovation priorities regarding decentralization included a number of novel elements, such as a territorial amalgamation to reduce the number of local government entities (Zapysnyy, 2016; Tymchak and Tymchak, 2017). This reform initially planned a voluntary amalgamation of territorial communities in which smaller municipalities could choose to merge and create larger ones (Udovychenko et al., 2017; Okunovska et al., 2020). This plan could not accomplish the planned mergers; the reform became mandatory and followed criteria set by the central government (Wright and Slukhai, 2021; Dmytryshyn et al., 2021). Another important element of the reform was fiscal decentralization, which granted local governments more control over their financial resources (Tymchak and Tymchak, 2017; Stroiko et al., 2021). This was closely linked to transfers of powers and the contents of the reforms aimed at reducing local governments' financial dependence on the central government (Oharenko and Kozachenko, 2020; Vergeles et al., 2020). These decentralization reforms included digital innovation elements such as new management information systems (Metelenko et al., 2020) and governance innovation elements such as participatory budgeting (Halhash et al., 2020).

Our review indicates that these innovation priorities generated a range of responses across Ukraine's regions. While larger municipalities such as Kyiv and Lviv engaged more deeply with participatory budgeting frameworks, other regions encountered barriers associated with political disengagement or limited institutional capacity (Schmäing, 2023). Similarly, territorial consolidation prompted efforts to restructure service provision and budgetary systems, although uneven regional uptakes reflected varied historical trajectories and administrative readinesses (Pronko et al., 2018; Kuts et al., 2021). Scholars consider these decentralization reforms as among Ukraine's most successful innovations (Khadzhyradiyeva et al., 2020). Although initially supported by public opinion, public support deteriorated over time (Dmytryshyn et al., 2021), and scholars have criticized these reforms' aims and impacts (Rabinovych and Gawrich, 2023). For instance, scholars point out that financial decentralization could not provide sustained tax revenues for local governments (Wright et al., 2022) and that local government budgets remain dependent on central transfers (Xin et al., 2021). Limited collaboration between municipalities have also hindered improvements to service provision (Wright and Slukhai, 2021). Further, regional differences played significant roles, with Ukraine's western and southern regions adopting reform elements more successfully than its eastern regions (Kuts et al., 2021). Finally, the increase in investment budgets for local governments has been criticized for exacerbating corruption and further empowering local elites (Dolan-Evans, 2023; Torikai, 2023).

Second, the diverse regional and local patronage networks, which are conducive to rent-seeking behaviors and corruption, continued to hinder the implementation of innovations throughout Period 3. Recent decentralization efforts redistributed power and elevated mayors in relation to governors. This led to greater fragmentation of patronage networks and reduced their dependence on the national governing party

(Torikai, 2023). This substantial increase in resources following the 2016 decentralization reform, coupled with the transfer of responsibility for investment projects to the periphery (Slukhai et al., 2019), provided excellent conditions for patronage networks and local elites to enjoy financial benefits from PSI (Dolan-Evans, 2023). There is evidence in the reviewed articles that these patronage networks embedded in the subnational context inhibited or exploited any innovation activities associated with decentralization at the subnational level. For instance, local elites posed obstacles to the amalgamation efforts during the decentralization process in the Kyiv region (Udovychenko et al., 2017). Likewise, the active introduction of smart city technologies was resisted by some politicians, who favored election-related clientelist spending (Lozynskyi et al., 2021).

4.3. Interpreting and synthesizing contextual dynamics

Building on the preceding chronological analysis of PSI in Ukraine across the three periods and the levels of political context, in this section we interpret and synthesize these findings to identify a set of underlying contextual dynamics. This interpretive step based on Appendix 3 reflects the logic of CIS, which emphasizes the value of narrative presentation to capture the complexity and embeddedness of social and political phenomena (Flemming, 2010; Moat et al., 2013). Having adopted a narrative format to present our findings, we now engage reflexively with the findings to critically interpret how PSI in Ukraine has been shaped by intersecting contextual dynamics (Kazimierzczak et al. 2013); we also build a conceptual framework (Fig. 2).

Our CIS reveals that political contexts at the international, national, and subnational levels strongly shaped PSI in Ukraine through a set of deeply intertwined contextual dynamics (critical junctures, path dependencies, power struggles, the redistribution of power, and cross-level interplays), while also highlighting the roles of agency, particularly during political transitions.

First, we found that transitions in the political context, when protracted power struggles acted as permissive conditions, opened critical junctures for PSI. In Ukraine, major systemic disruptions such as independence (1991), the Orange Revolution (2004), and the Revolution of Dignity (2014) created temporary institutional fluidity in which dominant rules and norms were contested. However, these junctures did not automatically lead to transformation. Rather, the permissive conditions, specifically related to international and national contexts, opened a set of options for constrained strategic agency. This refers to bounded yet purposeful actions by reformist coalitions and institutional entrepreneurs to alter institutional trajectories. Notably, this agency was not exercised in a vacuum; it was bounded by path dependency, as actors had to navigate inherited institutional legacies and entrenched power structures. Reformist coalitions operated within these constraints, yet were still able to shape new innovation priorities aimed at redistributing power and responding to public demands. For instance, post-revolution periods were characterized by civil society and donor coalitions pressing for reforms in transparency and decentralization—each emerging as innovation priorities shaped by a coalition's ability to manoeuvre within existing institutional legacies. In Fig. 2, this dynamic is illustrated by the top arrow from right to left labelled "Power Struggles", which created permissive conditions that opened critical junctures (starburst), and by the arrow directly beneath it labelled "Path Dependencies", which constrained agency (the curly bracket labelled "Agency with a Set of Potential Choices").

Second, the redistribution of power was a key intended outcome of many innovation priorities advanced by Western actors and pro-West domestic coalitions, who sought to institutionalize advantages following critical junctures by shifting power away from entrenched elites. At the national level, governments in Ukraine sought legitimacy to maintain international support and navigate tensions between the West and Russia. These reforms aimed to shift authority away from entrenched post-Soviet elites and centralized state institutions towards

local governments, civil society, and externally supported governance frameworks. This dynamic is depicted in Fig. 2 by the third arrow from left to right, labelled “Power Redistribution”, which illustrates how innovation priorities formulated after critical junctures aim to reshape Ukraine’s political context by redistributing power and institutionalizing advantage.

Third, power struggles—both vertical (across political contexts) and horizontal (among political, economic, and civic actors)—were central to shaping innovation priorities and their implementations as productive conditions. The power struggle between the West and Russia has strongly influenced the intensities and priorities of innovation. However, the productive conditions were more closely related to national and subnational contexts and actors. At the national level, such struggles were particularly pronounced in the contest between Western-aligned reform coalitions and entrenched oligarchic or pro-Russia elites. Also, repeated conflicts between reformist civil society actors and political elites undermined consistent implementation of innovations. At the subnational level, local elites and mayors often captured donor-led initiatives, such as participatory budgeting, thereby repurposing innovation to reinforce existing networks of influence. These struggles often delayed or distorted the implementation of innovations. This dynamic is illustrated in Fig. 2 by the fourth arrow from right to left, labelled “Power Struggles” which traces how such struggles (while interacting with path dependency) distort or constrain innovation processes across different levels of the political context.

Fourth, we found that PSI’s impacts were mediated by the persistence of path dependencies, which reinforces the historical legacies of existing power structures. At the national level, PSI in Ukraine has been shaped by power struggles, including political turmoil, civic activism supported by foreign governments and NGOs, and patronage networks linking political and business interests. At the subnational level, patronage networks hindered or exploited innovation efforts through rent-seeking behaviors while regional disparities constrained the implementations of innovations in the periphery. The most studied innovation priorities (decentralization and transparency) proposed significant redistribution of power and the reallocation of resources away from elites. However, these shifts were often met with resistance from oligarchs and patronage networks, who either resisted innovations outright to avoid losing power or exploited the new rents generated by these innovations. Our findings suggest that these dominant actors can adapt to the redistribution of power, maintaining rent-seeking behaviors to serve their interests in evolving networks. This constraining effect is visualized in Fig. 2 by the fifth arrow from right to left, labelled “Path Dependencies”. As a result, the enacted outcome of power redistribution remained limited, as shown by the sixth arrow from left to right, a narrower arrow labelled “power redistribution”.

Fifth, our conceptualization of the political context across the international, national, and subnational levels revealed complex cross-level interplays as a key dynamic shaping PSI. In the case of innovation activities in Ukraine supported by foreign governments and international organizations, as innovation progressed deeper into the political system, it became increasingly susceptible to adaptation by domestic actors. This finding highlights the significant interplays between the international and national political contexts in Ukraine. Tensions between Western countries and Russia led to growing international support for Ukraine, which served as an enabling condition for PSI. While international partners sought to address problems through innovation, path dependencies arising from the national and subnational contexts posed barriers to innovation. These barriers were strengthened by the fragmented projectification of support provided by international governments and organizations. Further, international tensions often resulted in domestic political turmoil, which, when combined with the existing national political context characterized by oligarchs and patronage networks at all levels of government, restricted PSI. Thus, there were multilevel interplays between the international, national, and subnational political contexts in Ukraine. These dynamics

are illustrated in Fig. 2 by the curved arrows on the right-hand side, labelled “Interplaying Contexts”, which show that PSI in Ukraine cannot be understood solely through isolated levels of the political context.

Finally, these dynamics, operating across time and levels, contributed to the formation of Ukraine’s innovation trajectory, a cumulative pathway shaped by previous reforms, contested political transitions, and enduring path dependencies. While many innovations were stalled, they nonetheless contributed to an evolving foundation for future initiatives. For instance, early efforts to establish a state treasury system in the 1990s, supported by the IMF and the World Bank, faced major barriers to implementation, yet laid the foundation for more comprehensive fiscal management reforms in later years (Vakulenko, 2022). Similarly, the decentralization agenda, introduced with limited impacts in the 1990s and 2000s owing to fears of separatism and resistance by elites, matured after 2014 into one of Ukraine’s most impactful PSI reforms, aided by international funding and the critical juncture of the Revolution of Dignity. Similarly, failed healthcare and civil service innovations during Period 3 generated institutional learning and shifted public expectations, contributing to later reform coalitions and innovation priorities. This cumulative and non-linear trajectory is illustrated in Fig. 2 by the downward wavy arrow on the left-hand side labelled “Innovation Trajectory” which incorporates the three successive periods of “Innovation Priorities”. It reflects how innovation emerges not from isolated breakthroughs but from long-term, politically contingent processes.

5. Discussion

5.1. Political context as a contested, multilevel arena of power dynamics

Our findings advance the understanding of political context in PSI from a generic background condition to a dynamic, multilevel arena of contestation and power dynamics. By explicitly integrating unsuccessful, stalled, or contested innovations alongside successful ones, our approach addresses earlier limitations identified by Cinar et al. (2024b) and provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting PSI as inherently political, fragmented, and continually shaped by evolving power dynamics (Peters et al., 2005; Pierson, 2016). Political context comprises international, national, and subnational levels, each populated by shifting coalitions of actors who compete for influence, resources, and agenda-setting power (Hantrais, 2008). Thus, the selection and implementation of PSI priorities are fundamentally shaped by the productive conditions (Soifer, 2012) arising from power struggles, rather than neutral or purely technical considerations. In developing country contexts, these struggles occur both vertically (across political levels, as international organizations and donors exert pressure on national policymakers, who in turn negotiate, adapt, or resist these pressures) and horizontally, as competing domestic actors (such as reformist elites, entrenched bureaucracies, and civil society groups) contest the designs and implementations of innovation initiatives (Cinar et al., 2024a).

The intersection of vertical and horizontal power struggles means that innovation priorities are continually negotiated, adapted, or even co-opted, often resulting in compromise, resistance, or uneven implementation (Geels, 2004). Thus, the trajectory of PSI is not pre-determined; instead, it is the contingent outcome of ongoing, multilevel power negotiations and contestation (Pierson, 2016). HI’s attention to multilevel dynamics further reveals that external (international) pressures for innovation (through funding, technical assistance, and/or isomorphic policy diffusion) are invariably refracted through domestic institutional and political realities (Avelino, 2017). While external actors may catalyze or support reform agendas, their ultimate impacts are mediated by national and subnational path dependencies, institutional capacities, and the strategic agencies of local actors (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). The projectification of international aid and the fragmentation of external interventions often limit their transformative potentials, as domestic actors adapt or resist such initiatives in

accordance with entrenched logics and interests. This aligns with and expands the observations of Drechsler et al. (2024) regarding the isomorphic pressures exerted by international actors on developing countries' public administrations as well as Pierson's (2016) concept of ideational power.

HI emphasizes that institutional arrangements (rules, norms, resources allocations, and governance structures) are the products of ongoing power struggles in which certain groups succeed in embedding their interests and preferred innovation agendas in formal structures (Peters et al., 2005; Pierson, 2016). The emergence of new innovation priorities and their implementations are shaped by how powerful groups such as state elites, bureaucratic coalitions, and/or local networks adjust their strategies to maintain their influence as a political context evolves (Roberts and Geels, 2019). These dynamics become particularly visible when reform efforts seek to redistribute power, whether from central authorities to local actors, or from entrenched elites to new coalitions. HI demonstrates that these intended redistributions are seldom straightforward, as existing power holders adapt by reframing, redirecting, or selectively supporting innovation priorities to protect their positions (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). Over time, coalitions that control agenda-setting, frame policy choices, or mobilize resources are more likely to see their innovation preferences become embedded in funding allocations and policy narratives. This process, which HI scholars describe as the *institutionalization of advantage* (Pierson, 2016), means that, once established, innovation priorities aligned with dominant coalitions can become self-reinforcing, marginalizing alternative approaches and narrowing the range of feasible innovation trajectories.

5.2. Critical junctures, path dependencies, and innovation trajectories

Our study further advances PSI theory by refining the conceptualization of critical junctures. HI, with its focus on critical junctures (Capoccia, 2016), offers a useful theoretical lens to understand how revolutionary political transitions influence PSI, an area that has been largely overlooked in the PSI literature. While the PSI literature has traditionally focused on managerial and organizational factors, recent studies (e.g., Cinar et al., 2024a) have highlighted the importance of HI in understanding a context's roles in PSI. Drawing on the case of Singapore, Cinar et al. (2024b) empirically identified how a significant transition in the political context such as the historically low electoral vote in the 2011 elections acted as a critical juncture. This event shifted the soft-authoritarian regime's innovation priorities. Compared to Singapore, where political transitions are fairly incremental, developing countries' transitions are more profound and tend to manifest as revolutions. While Cinar et al. (2024b) acknowledge the significance of critical junctures only briefly, our study systematically foregrounds this concept, offering a detailed analysis of how such bounded periods of agency influence the evolutions and implementations of innovation priorities over time.

While previous PSI studies often conceptualized political transitions as *windows of opportunity* for innovation (Cinar et al., 2024b), our findings advance nuanced interpretation: critical junctures are opened by permissive conditions (Soifer, 2012) and constitute periods of temporarily heightened yet fundamentally constrained agency for innovation. Drawing on Capoccia (2016) as well as Capoccia and Kelemen (2007), we argue that such junctures may relax existing constraints, yet the choices available to reformist coalitions remain tightly bounded by historical pathways and entrenched power relationships. Major disruptions such as revolutions, crises, and regime changes do not automatically result in transformative innovations. Instead, the innovation priorities that emerge during these moments are filtered through existing institutional legacies and prevailing power dynamics (Thelen, 1999). As a result, the scope of innovations is defined not simply by actors' aspirations, but by the feasible options in historically shaped trajectories. This perspective moves beyond the notion of crisis-driven automatic innovation; instead, it emphasizes how agency is exercised

in, and often constrained by, deeply embedded institutional contexts. Building on Cinar et al. (2024b), we demonstrate that pre-existing political and institutional structures strongly shape the directions and contents of innovation during critical junctures. Thus, the emergence, intermittence, or stalling of innovation priorities reflects the negotiated and often-contested nature of political change, echoing Johnstone and Schot's (2022) insights into how context structures, and often limits, the possibilities for innovation.

Our findings also illustrate that PSI trajectories are non-linear and cumulative processes shaped by ongoing interactions between the political context and political agency. PSI typically unfolds in a non-linear pattern, marked by periods of stasis punctuated by critical junctures. Notably, these junctures rarely erase the institutional memory or previously achieved partial progress; rather, they may suspend, supplant, or temporarily redirect ongoing PSI efforts. When conditions become favorable again, earlier agendas may be revived and adapted, highlighting the iterative, contingent, and often intermittent nature of PSI trajectories. This extends the small body of PSI trajectory studies (e.g., Salge, 2012; Cinar et al., 2024a) that emphasize the importance of long-term temporal perspectives in understanding PSI. However, our research goes further by explicitly highlighting how interrupted and stalled innovations contribute to a cumulative innovation trajectory, even when they fail to consolidate immediately. Innovations that stall or fail still generate institutional learning and shift public expectations, influencing subsequent rounds of innovation priorities.

6. Conclusion

In sum, we have synthesized interdisciplinary evidence from the fragmented literature in the areas of public management, politics, international relations, and development studies to conceptualize the role of political context in PSI, with a particular focus on power dynamics and using HI as a theoretical lens. In doing so, we make two primary contributions:

First, we advance PSI theory by developing a conceptual framework for analyzing political context as a multilevel, contested arena that encompasses international, national, and subnational levels. We theorize how power dynamics within and across these levels shape which innovation priorities are selected, advanced or stalled. While previous work, including Cinar et al. (2024b), has emphasized the roles of the political context and of political transitions, our study extends this by conceptualising political context not as a static backdrop, but as a dynamic site of contestation, negotiation, and adaptation, where individual agency and coalitions with divergent agendas compete to influence the innovation landscape. Drawing on HI (Pierson, 2016; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Peters et al., 2005), we show how both the selection and implementation of innovation priorities are conditioned by productive conditions (Soifer, 2012) stemming from cross-level power dynamics and the institutionalization of advantages. This approach enables us to incorporate not only successful innovations, but also those that are stalled, contested, or blocked, a limitation acknowledged in earlier work (Cinar et al., 2024a). This also addresses a critical gap identified in recent systematic reviews regarding the roles of political antecedents in PSI (Criado et al., 2023). Finally, this analysis helps to address the challenge of understanding the nature of innovation in services (Martin, 2016) by elucidating how contextual political factors actively shape innovation in public services delivery.

Second, we deepen PSI theory by employing HI with a refined conception of critical junctures and the innovation trajectories they set in motion over time. While previous studies treated crises as generic *windows of opportunity* (Cinar et al., 2024a), we build on Capoccia (2016) as well as Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) to define crises and political transitions as critical junctures, i.e., temporally bounded periods of heightened yet path-constrained agency. Unlike previous PSI studies that refer to critical junctures only briefly (e.g., Cinar et al., 2024b), we place them at the center of our theoretical framework. We demonstrate

that the influences of crises and political transitions on PSI are not determined by the severity of disruption alone, but by the structure of the political context, including the alignment of dominant power coalitions, pre-institutionalized advantages, and layered historical innovation priorities (Pierson, 2016). In this view, permissive conditions (Soifer, 2012) arising from power struggles temporarily relax, but do not eliminate, institutional constraints, creating moments in which action is possible within historically bounded pathways. Crucially, building on Salge (2012) and Cinar et al. (2024b), we show how these moments influenced innovation trajectories that unfolded non-linearly across time: whether successful or stalled, early efforts leave institutional legacies and shift actors' expectations, feeding into subsequent rounds of innovation priorities. By foregrounding how critical junctures generate cumulative and often-intermittent innovation trajectories (where past initiatives shape the feasible options at later junctures), our analysis shows that PSI evolves as a longitudinal, negotiated process rather than as a series of isolated episodes of opportunity.

We trust that this study leads to further research into the role of political context in shaping PSI. Our conceptualization of political context and the importance of power presented here provides a foundation for future studies exploring the multifaceted ways in which political dynamics influence innovation at various levels.

First, given the growing interest in citizen innovation (Chen et al., 2020), which focuses on engaging citizens to improve public services, our findings offer a framework for examining how political transitions shape these efforts. Citizen innovation often necessitates significant reallocations of power. Future research could explore how political transitions, particularly those marked by critical junctures or revolutionary shifts, reshape the conditions for citizen innovation, with attention to the isomorphic pressures that accompany such transitions in internationalized contexts. Understanding how political systems adjust to these transitions and enable or hinder citizen engagement offers crucial insights for improving PSI outcomes.

Second, the national context's roles in PSI, particularly the roles of social context, require further investigation. Our review identified preliminary insights into the significant interplays between political and social contexts, as evidenced by the deeply embedded societal perceptions of corruption that have impacted on the implementation of innovations. We encourage researchers to investigate how a social context interacts with political transitions, public trust, and civic engagement to shape the priorities and outcomes of PSI. Such studies could explore how societal perceptions of corruption evolve during periods of political change and how shifts in these perceptions may create enabling conditions for innovation. Also, an examination of how public attitudes towards innovation initiatives differ across regions or demographic groups could provide insights into tailoring innovations according to a specific social context.

Third, our findings on the significant influences of international political contexts on PSI could inform studies on cross-border innovations facilitated by intergovernmental organizations, as highlighted by Meissner et al. (2021). Cross-border innovations often emerge in periods of political transition when isomorphic pressures such as alignment with international standards or governance models shape priorities and legitimacy-seeking behaviors. Future research could investigate how political transitions in developing countries, influenced by global power struggles or international agreements, direct cross-border innovation initiatives. For instance, exploring how mechanisms of isomorphism operate during political transitions to create conditions for collaborative innovation would deepen our understanding of the roles of international political contexts in PSI. This perspective could shed light on how intergovernmental organizations can navigate political transitions to foster innovation in areas such as digital governance, public health, and sustainability.

Finally, future research should explore long-term innovation trajectories, focusing on how paths are created and how portfolios of innovation priorities emerge, adapt, and evolve over time. A longitudinal

perspective can shed light on how innovation priorities build cumulatively over time, aligning with or diverging from established paths, and how these portfolios adapt to shifting political, social, and international dynamics. In doing so, the literature can better understand the conditions that enable coherent and transformative innovation strategies in both stable and fluid political contexts.

Our study offers practical insights for policymakers and international organizations involved in PSI in developing countries with fluid political contexts. We highlight the importance of aligning innovation priorities with broader political dynamics to ensure meaningful impacts. The roles of political context should be considered with care when developing and implementing PSI in developing countries. While international engagement, aid, and knowledge transfers are pivotal in driving PSI in developing countries, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the challenges posed by elements of national and subnational political contexts, such as path dependencies, corruption, and patronage networks. Strengthening accountability, enhancing transparency through co-creation, promoting civic engagement, and adopting a long-term and well-coordinated approach are essential steps to counteract these entrenched barriers.

Further, adaptive strategies such as building local capacities to effectively implement reforms can help to mitigate the risks associated with knowledge transfers, ensuring that the innovations are sustainable and locally adapted. This can be accomplished by maintaining the willingness of political leaders and identifying policy entrepreneurs at both the national and subnational levels to sponsor PSI activities. To enhance PSI's impacts, it is crucial that policymakers focus on creating a robust regulatory framework that supports innovation and reduces opportunities for rent-seeking behaviors. Engaging civil society organizations more deeply in a reform process can help to shift power dynamics in favor of citizens and can ensure that innovations lead to meaningful changes. International partners should consider the complexities of a political context in developing countries when designing support programs, ensuring that these initiatives are flexible and adaptive to local conditions.

Second, our findings emphasize the need for long-term international engagement, consistent political support, and adaptive strategies to address regional disparities and path-dependent constraints. We underscore the roles of civic participation and NGOs in driving PSI, while cautioning against the risks of patronage networks. These lessons provide useful guidance for designing and implementing PSI in similar contexts of political transition and instability, as well as for supporting the potential post-war recovery of Ukraine through PSI. Effective co-creation between international donors, Ukrainian authorities, and civil society organizations is crucial to ensure that aid is directed to areas that will have the most substantial and lasting impacts. Aid programs should include measures to build institutional capacities as well as promote participation and transparency practices at both the national and subnational levels. By fostering a culture of accountability, adopting the latest digital technologies, and supporting grassroots civic activism, international aid can help mitigate the negative effects of embedded corruption and rent-seeking behaviors. Ensuring that aid is flexible and adaptive to the evolving political landscape will be key to maximizing its effectiveness and supporting Ukraine's long-term development and stability.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Emre Cinar: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Oksana Prodius:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Ivan Sokoly:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Sercan Ozcan:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition. **Ali Asker Guenduez:**

Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

In the preparation of this article, the authors used ChatGPT to improve the fluency of the text written by the authors. The authors then reviewed and edited the content as needed, and take full responsibility for it.

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Appendix 1. Chronological list of coded innovation projects across the three periods and the reviewed studies

Period	Years	Innovation priority	Study authors
Establishing democratic institutions and market economy foundations (Period 1: 1991 to 2004)	1991 to 1996	Development of the Constitution	Wise and Brown, 1996
	1994	The Parliamentary Development Project	Wise and Brown, 1996
	1994	Development of the Institute of Public Administration and Local Government	Hague et al., 1995
	1995	Privatization and a shift to free markets	Kudelia, 2012; Umantsiv et al., 2019
	1996	Foundation of the Accounting Chamber of Ukraine	Slobodyanik and Chyzhevska, 2019
	1996 to 1997	Democratic local governance project	Blair, 2000
	1997	Adoption of self-government status of towns and villages	Swianiewicz, 2006; Leitch, 2017
	1997	Simplified Single Tax policy innovation	Fischer-Smith, 2018; Bedianashvili et al., 2019; Fedosov et al., 2019
	1997 to 2004	Treasury system project	Vakulenko, 2022
	2002 to 2010	The Health of the Nation program	Vakulenko et al., 2020
	2001 to 2004	Fiscal decentralization	Leitch, 2017
Enhancing public administration capacity and empowering local communities (Period 2: 2004 to 2014)	2005 to 2010	The democratization and election reforms	Casier, 2011; Barrett, 2018
	2005 to 2014	Higher education reform and the adoption of the Bologna Principles	Osipian, 2014
	2007 to 2010	The modernization of hospitals	Dolowitz et al., 2020
	2008 to 2014	Public finance modernization project	Bedianashvili et al., 2019; Vakulenko, 2022
	2007	A new community partnership model through twinning projects	Panchuk, 2019; Shyrokykh, 2019
	2007	The adoption of participatory rural development	Kvartiuk and Curtiss, 2019
	2010	HIV prevention policy innovation in partnership with NGOs	Harmer et al., 2013
	2010	The adoption of a PPP procurement model	Baranovska et al., 2022
	2010	The National Training System for Civil Servants	Goncharuk et al., 2021
	2012	The adoption of Technical Regulations on Standards for Industrial Products	Langbein and Wolczuk, 2012
	2004 to 2014	Civil society empowerment	Burlyuk and Shapovalova, 2017
	2004 to 2014	The adoption of environmental governance	Ruban and Rydén, 2019
	2010 to 2014	Asylum policy innovation in partnership with NGOs	Mützelburg, 2023
Strengthening governance, decentralization, and combatting corruption (Period 3: 2014 to 2022)	2014	The establishment of anticorruption institutions	Barrett, 2018; Fedotov and Voloshyna, 2019; Khadzhyradieva et al., 2021; Kivalov, 2021; Nekoliak and Kostenko, 2021; Bondarenko et al., 2021; Nekoliak, 2022; Umantsiv et al., 2019
	2014	The adoption of corporate governance practices into Ukraine's SOEs	Umantsiv et al., 2019
	2014 to 2018	The adoption of healthcare decentralization reform	Tkachenko, 2017; Vakulenko et al., 2020; Vergeles et al., 2020; Yermolenko et al., 2020
	2014 to 2019	International trade-related reforms	Predmestnikov and Gumenyuk, 2019; Wolczuk, 2019; Rabinovych, 2024; Duleba, 2022
	2014 to 2021	Digital transformation	Kotina et al., 2022; Kud, 2023
	2021		

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Period	Years	Innovation priority	Study authors
	2015	Decentralization reforms	Zapysnyy, 2016; Tymchak and Tymchak, 2017; Udovychenko et al., 2017; Pronko et al., 2018; Leitch, 2019; Slukhai et al., 2019; Sabatovych et al., 2019; Tkachenko and Kulyk, 2019; Metelenko et al., 2020; Oharenko and Kozachenko, 2020; Okunovska et al., 2020; Dmytryshyn et al., 2021; Hedikova and Muzychenko, 2021; Kuts et al., 2021; Khadzhyradieva et al., 2020; Khadzhyradieva et al., 2021; Stroiko et al., 2021; Wright and Slukhai, 2021; Xin et al., 2021; Gryshchenko et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2022; Dolan-Evans, 2023; Iliashenko et al., 2023; Torikai, 2023; Rabinovych and Gawrich, 2023; Barrett, 2018; Slukhai et al., 2019; Kruglashov and Kostenko, 2021; Odnolko et al., 2022
	2015	Transparency reforms	Kaletnik and Zdyrko, 2021; Kivalov, 2021
	2015	Public financial control reforms	Halhash et al., 2020; Tikhonova et al., 2022; Kuruppu et al., 2023; Schmäing, 2023
	2015	Participatory decision-making and budgeting	Lozynskyy et al., 2021
	2015	Smart City Lviv	Turkot et al., 2022
	2015	Electronic petitions	Wolczuk, 2019; Khadzhyradieva et al., 2020; Samokhvalov and Strelkov, 2021; Khadzhyradieva et al., 2021; Goncharuk et al., 2021
	2016	Civil service reform for non-political recruitment	Kaletnik and Zdyrko, 2019; Umantsiv et al., 2019; Fedotov and Voloshyna, 2019; Rabinovych, 2024
	2016	The development of the e-procurement platform ProZorro	Karpenko and Glubochenko, 2018; Sukhonos et al., 2022
	2016	Digital Agenda 2020	Sakhanienko et al., 2021
	2016	The establishment of the Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons of Ukraine	
	2017	The digitalization of court processes	Barabash et al., 2022
	2017	Transparent Cities Program	Mazepus et al., 2021
	2018	New Ukrainian school initiative, decentralization in education	Oharenko and Kozachenko, 2020
	2019	Introducing contract-based employment	Khadzhyradieva et al., 2021
	2019	Judicial reform	Barrett, 2018; Tataryn, 2019; Nekoliak, 2022
	2019	The establishment of a land property market	Viedrov, 2023
	2020	The Diia electronic government platform	Kud, 2023

Appendix 2. Overview over the main findings of 84 empirical articles on political context and agency

Level of political context (third-order concepts)	Detailed context elements (second-order concepts)	Academic articles reviewed
1. The international level	Power struggles between the West and Russia Protracted power conflict between Western countries and Russia leading to revolutionary political transitions. External pressures Isomorphic pressures redefined roles, redistributed power, and triggered legitimacy conflicts, while also driving transitions towards a market economy, decentralization, and increased transparency, seeking to institutionalize advantages. Knowledge and policy transfers as well as financial aid Western countries as well as intergovernmental organizations and donors influenced PSI via knowledge transfers and international aid. The EU partnership and membership process Partnership with the EU since 1994, intensified by the ENP (2005) and the Association Agreement (2014), triggering innovation activities. Fragmented and international aid through projectification Fragmented, normative, and disconnected innovation activities owing to direct local and regional engagement. Armed regional power conflict Conflict with Russia over the eastern provinces, impacting on innovation efforts. Growing involvement of international NGOs Increased interactions with international NGOs (e.g., Transparency International).	Barrett (2018); Sabatovych et al. (2019); Gryshchenko et al. (2022); Duleba (2022) Hague et al. (1995); Wise and Brown (1996) Blair (2000); Tkachenko (2017); Barrett (2018); Leitch (2019); Slobodyanik and Chyzhevska (2019); Okunovska et al. (2020); Dmytryshyn et al. (2021); Samokhvalov and Strelkov (2021); Vakulenko (2022) Casier (2011); Bedianashvili et al. (2019); Gryshchenko et al. (2022); Predmestnikov and Gumenyuk (2019); Sabatovych et al. (2019); Wolczuk (2019); Shyrokykh (2019); Panchuk (2019); Wright and Slukhai (2021); Rabinovych, 2024 Harmer et al. (2013); Leitch (2017); Schmäing (2023) Sakhanienko et al. (2021); Rabinovych and Gawrich (2023); Kruglashov and Kostenko (2021)
2. The national level	An ideological and political shift towards a free market economy A shift from a communist ideology to a capitalist one. Path dependency to a Soviet mindset and Soviet structures Power remained concentrated in the state, and the Soviet ideal of a central public administration remained influential. A fluid political environment An unstable political order, frequently changing presidents at the national political level. Rent-seeking behaviors in central patronage networks Corruption as an embedded problem owing to rent-seeking behaviors	Hague et al. (1995); Umantsiv et al. (2019); Vakulenko (2022), Kud (2023) Hague et al. (1995); Umantsiv et al. (2019); Vakulenko (2022), Kud (2023) Casier (2011); Fedosov et al. (2019); Kudelia (2012); Langbein and Wolczuk (2012); Ruban and Rydén (2019); Vakulenko (2022) Blair (2000); Kubicek (2009); Langbein and Wolczuk (2012); Kudelia (2012); Fedotov and Voloshyna (2019); Umantsiv et al. (2019); Kaletnik

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Level of political context (third-order concepts)	Detailed context elements (second-order concepts)	Academic articles reviewed
	among political elites, and a growing power base of oligarchs exacerbating corruption, as well as their exploitation of redistributions of power associated with innovation.	and Zdyrko (2021); Kivalov (2021); Mazepus et al. (2021); Odnolko et al. (2022)
	Power struggles between institutions Resistance from existing institutions to preserve their power bases, including turf battles.	Kaletnik and Zdyrko (2019); Bondarenko et al. (2021); Nekoliak (2022)
3. The subnational level	A centralized power structure Power concentrated at the center, with subnational governments operating under a centralist system where governors are appointed by central government and limited power is distributed to selected local mayors.	Swianiewicz (2006); Kuts et al. (2021)
	The redistribution of power through decentralization Decentralization efforts reshaping the context and allocating more power to local mayors and local authorities in relation to governors and central government.	Pronko et al. (2018); Tkachenko and Kulyk (2019); Torikai (2023); Stroiko et al. (2021)
	Regional and local patronage networks exploiting redistributions of power Elected governors and mayors, as part of patronage networks with local elites, exploited financial resources provided by international donors rather than improving citizen participation.	Udovychenko et al. (2017); Kvartiuk and Curtiss (2019); Slukhai et al. (2019); Lozynskyy et al. (2021); Mazepus et al. (2021); Kuruppu et al. (2023); Evans (2023)
	The ethnic diversity of regions Concerns that the regions' ethnic compositions could lead to separatism.	Leitch (2017)
	Limited citizen participation achieved Limited civil society involvement in the management and allocation of local budgets owing to decentralizing innovations.	Tymchak and Tymchak (2017); Vergeles et al. (2020); Halhash et al. (2020); Turkot et al. (2022); Xin et al. (2021)
4. Agency and coalitions	Different degrees of commitment to innovation among political leaders and parties Political leaders and parties demonstrated varying degrees of commitment to PSI.	Kubicek (2009); Osipian (2014); Zapysnyy (2016); Barrett (2018); Fischer-Smith (2018); Karpenko and Glubochenko (2018); Goncharuk et al. (2021); Tataryn (2019); Khadzhyradieva et al. (2021); Hedikova and Muzychenko (2021); Samokhvalov and Strelkov (2021); Barabash et al. (2022); Baranovska et al. (2022); Kotina et al. (2022); Sukhonos et al. (2022); Viedrov (2023)
	Strategic engagement of civil society by international donors International organizations increasingly engaged directly with NGOs and local government agents.	Harmer et al. (2013); Kvartiuk and Curtiss (2019); Shyrokykh (2019); Panchuk (2019); Dolowitz et al. (2020); Kuruppu et al. (2023); Mützelburg (2023)
	Civic activism as a driver of innovation priorities Social demands and movements such as the Revolution of Dignity driving change and innovation, supported by the international context.	Kudelia (2012); Udovychenko et al. (2017); Burlyuk and Shapovalova (2017); Tataryn (2019); Fedotov and Voloshyna (2019); Kvartiuk and Curtiss (2019); Khadzhyradieva et al. (2020); Kruglashov and Kostenko (2021); Nekoliak (2022); Tikhonova et al. (2022); Viedrov (2023); Mazepus et al. (2021); Mützelburg (2023)
	Domestic public entrepreneurs A number of reforms were initially pushed by high-level domestic bureaucrats and reformers in collaboration with EU and OECD officials.	Mazepus et al. (2021); Vakulenko (2022); Iliashenko et al. (2023)
	The importance of elected governors and mayors Mayors established or chaired local NGOs in order to access EU project funding.	Udovychenko et al. (2017); Kvartiuk and Curtiss (2019); Slukhai et al. (2019); Lozynskyy et al. (2021); Mazepus et al. (2021); Kuruppu et al. (2023); Evans (2023)

Appendix 3. Contextual dynamics, second-order themes, and multilevel interplays

Contextual dynamics	Second-order themes (political context and agency) and related innovation trajectories (Periods 1, 2, and 3)	Multilevel interplays between level(s) of political context
Power struggles → critical junctures → strategic agency within constrained options owing to path dependencies → innovation priorities	Power struggles between the West and Russia created brief yet pivotal critical junctures (1991, 2004, 2014) that opened constrained yet significant opportunities for strategic agency, enabling actors to negotiate new institutional directions or to attempt to reorient reform agendas, although realization remained shaped by prior power dynamics and institutional legacies. The EU partnership and membership process: The deepening of EU-Ukraine relationships intensified tensions with Russia and polarized domestic elites, contributing to political instability. These confrontations culminated in critical junctures (2004, 2014), during which competing agendas clashed. The EU simultaneously shaped innovation blueprints aligned with European governance models, but their implementations unfolded in fits and starts, depending on which political coalition (Western- or Russia-aligned) gained momentum during each juncture. These blueprints influenced innovation across all three periods, even when temporarily stalled. Different degrees of commitment to innovation among political leaders and parties meant that innovation priorities varied depending on who gained control during each critical juncture. While reformers pushed innovation agendas, countervailing elites often blocked or reversed reforms, especially between 2004 and 2014. Strategic engagement of civil society by international donors enabled external actors to bypass resistance by elites, especially after 2014, supporting	International, national International, national, subnational

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Contextual dynamics	Second-order themes (political context and agency) and related innovation trajectories (Periods 1, 2, and 3)	Multilevel interplays between level(s) of political context
	initiatives such as ProZorro, participatory budgeting, and local governance capacity-building. Civic activism as a driver of innovation priorities (e.g., Euromaidan) temporarily created PSI momentum and pressured elites to adopt decentralization and transparency reforms, though these were often delayed or diluted, illustrating bounded agency under structural constraints. Domestic public entrepreneurs (e.g., civil servants, advisors) initiated reforms such as financial management reform. These actors operated within constrained bureaucratic settings and advanced reform incrementally, with some success post-2014 (e.g., Diia), but faced rollback risks. The importance of elected governors and mayors grew during decentralization. Some used EU instruments to implement innovations locally, while others aligned with patronage networks and repurposed innovations for capture by local elites, showing that PSI implementations were context-specific and contingent. An ideological and political shift towards a free market economy in the early 1990s introduced innovation priorities that aimed to reduce centralized state control and redistribute power through administrative, economic, and institutional reforms. External pressures from donors (IMF, EU) promoted reforms that aimed to reallocate decision-making authority from central ministries to regional and local administrations, to increase transparency in resources allocation, and to strengthen institutional checks through independent agencies. These reform priorities became particularly prominent after 2014 (Period 3). Knowledge and policy transfers as well as financial aid provided by Western countries and international organizations offered reform templates and technical tools that supported the redistribution of administrative, fiscal, and decision-making power through PSI initiatives across all three periods. The growing importance of Ukrainian civil society and NGOs reflected efforts to empower nonstate actors by expanding their roles in shaping local policy agendas, monitoring government performance, and participating in decision-making processes. Innovation priorities supported their involvement in oversight, budget planning, and public services design, especially during Periods 2 and 3. Rent-seeking behaviors among central patronage networks was a fundamental governance challenge that innovation priorities sought to confront by weakening elites' control over public resources, limiting discretionary decision-making, and disrupting informal power structures. Innovation blueprints were designed to shift authority away from entrenched political actors and towards more transparent, rules-based, and participatory institutions. Growing civic activism and participation post-2014 advanced reforms that sought to embed citizens' voices in resources planning and local priority-setting through mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, town hall consultations, and digital feedback platforms (Period 3). The redistribution of power through decentralization became a priority of Western-supported PSI, particularly in Period 3, with legal and institutional frameworks developed to shift administrative and fiscal authority from the central state to local governments.	International, national, subnational
Innovation priorities → redistribution of power	Path dependency to a Soviet mindset and Soviet structures restricted the range of innovation possibilities during each critical juncture. Innovations often reproduced central control, patronage networks, bureaucratic rigidity, or symbolic compliance, especially in Periods 1 and 2. A centralized power structure constrained full territorial governance reform. Even when decentralization laws passed, power remained informally centralized in many sectors and regions. Rent-seeking behaviors by central patronage networks absorbed or reconfigured externally supported PSI initiatives to serve elites' interests. Rather than being displaced, these networks adapted to changing circumstances, contributing to partial implementation, reform fatigue, and widespread stalled innovations across all three periods. Power struggles between institutions (including President-Parliamentary rivalry and inter-agency conflicts) impeded coordinated reform as competing actors blocked or undermined one another's initiatives. These conflicts further fragmented PSI trajectories and disrupted policy continuity. The regions' ethnic diversity introduced political sensitivities around identity, language, and geopolitical orientation, particularly in eastern Ukraine. These tensions narrowed the set of politically acceptable options during critical junctures and made territorial reforms highly contentious. Fragmented, normative, and disconnected innovation activities owing to donor-led projectification created parallel reform efforts that lacked systemic integration. This undermined continuity, reinforced dependency on external actors, and made reforms vulnerable to political turnover, especially in Periods 1 and 2.	International, national, subnational

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Contextual dynamics	Second-order themes (political context and agency) and related innovation trajectories (Periods 1, 2, and 3)	Multilevel interplays between level(s) of political context
	Regional and local patronage networks harnessed the opportunities created by decentralization reforms to consolidate their influences over local budgets and appointments. In some cases, they strategically repurposed externally funded innovation initiatives and development projects to serve the interests of local elites. While these reforms were intended to enhance accountability and participation, such dynamics limited their legitimacy and hindered meaningful empowerment of citizens at the local level. Limited citizen participation achieved post-2014 reflected enduring path-dependent norms of top-down governance and bureaucratic control. Although participatory mechanisms such as open budgeting were formally introduced, they operated within institutional cultures that historically marginalized civic inputs, limiting these innovations' transformative potentials. This mechanism draws on the Appendix's chronological list of coded innovation projects and implementation challenges identified in the thematic analysis. This shows that each set of innovation priorities built on prior initiatives—both successful and stalled—and contained early signals of future directions. For instance, during Period 1, foundational innovations focused on core democratic institutions and free markets; even though some of these efforts stalled, they laid the groundwork for Period 2's focus on public administration capacity and community empowerment. Likewise, in Period 2, transparency and civic engagement initiatives, despite not all reaching fruition, foreshadowed Period 3's emphasis on anticorruption and decentralization. Our analysis demonstrates how innovation priorities evolve cumulatively, creating and reinforcing innovation trajectories.	
Innovation priorities → Innovation trajectories		

Data availability

The articles included in the review are marked in the reference list.

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