

**‘Belarusianization or Europeanization? Ukraine Struggles to Define
its Identity Between Two Elections’,**

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The aim of my talk is to analyze the evolution of Ukraine in the post-Soviet era in order to explain why a deep crisis has taken hold in 2000-2002. A central theme of the talk will be the influence of the national question on post-Soviet Ukraine’s transition which has remained paramount.

Evolution of the Post-Soviet Regime

In the late Soviet era national democrats were unable to take control of Ukraine and effect a change of elite. National democrats – who spearheaded the reform movement then and now – were only popular in Ukrainophone central and western Ukraine. This has remained the case throughout the 1990s. Our Ukraine has changed this to some extent by moving national democrats into Russophone eastern Ukraine.

The sovereign (national) communists led by Leonid Kravchuk were primarily influential in eastern and southern Ukraine. In the 1990s they remained effectively in power after Kravchuk’s victory in the 1991 presidential elections. In 1994 and 1999 this was confirmed by Leonid Kuchma’s victory. Only in 2004 could a candidate supported by the national democrats –Viktor Yushchenko - possibly win the presidency, 13 years after Kravchuk.

In post-Soviet Ukraine the sovereign (national) communists became oligarchs and increasingly allied themselves to the executive. The 'blackmail state', as Keith Darden describes Ukraine, allowed corruption to flourish in return for political loyalty. Pro-executive oligarchs entrenched themselves in the more Sovietized eastern Ukraine, which had been their base of support in the late Soviet era when Rukh grew into a mass movement in western Ukraine. In the 2002 elections the pro-executive, oligarchic For a United Ukraine (ZYU) and the Social Democratic united party (SDPUo) could only obtain high support in eastern Ukraine. The only oblast ZYU came first in was Donetsk.

1990-1994: Unstructured Party of Power

During this period the sovereign (national) communists remained as an unstructured party of power. The party of power had five characteristics which have remained:

1. **Statists**: Membership of the Russian-Belarusian union is therefore ruled out.
2. **Low Commitment to Nation building**: commitment to Ukrainianization is weak. sovereign (national) communists implemented the russification drive of the Volodymyr Shcherbytsky era (1972-1989). Could they really be expected to do an about face today and back Ukrainianization?
3. **Ideologically Amorphous**: little commitment to anything except power and money. Western scholars who attributed ideological motives to the party of power have been proved wrong.
4. **Hybrid Regime**: preference for a regime that includes elements of the former Soviet regime and a market democracy.

5. **Immorality and Deception: anything is acceptable in the pursuit of power and money coupled with a refusal to accept responsibility for one's actions.**

The use of deception and untruths is normal.

Where had the party of power emerged from? In 1985 the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) was the largest republican party with 3.5 million members. In August 1991 it was banned and then a new KPU was legalized in October 1993. The new KPU has only recruited 150,000 members, or less than ten per cent of its Soviet era membership. The nomenklatura of the KPU readily ditched the KPU in August 1991. Its ideological commitment to communism had long eroded during the era of stagnation which in Ukraine lasted from 1972-1989 under Shcherbytsky. The majority of KPU members did not therefore bother re-joining the new KPU.

The new KPU could not become a national communist or social democratic party, as in the Baltic states and central Europe. Working against this was the national question in its heartland of support in the Donbas and the Crimea. The KPU continues to be the only Ukrainian party where the proportion of Russians is higher than their proportion in the Ukrainian population. The Socialist Party led by Oleksandr Moroz is more akin to a national communist-social democratic hybrid from the former KPU. Not surprisingly its base of support is in central Ukraine.

In the 1994 parliament elected on a fully majoritarian law the KPU won 80 seats. Despite a profound socio-economic crisis this was only increased to 120 in the 1998 parliament elected on a mixed majoritarian: proportional law. By this years elections the KPU was in decline. Its number of deputies had been reduced by half. Flirtation with the executive had harmed its image as an 'opposition' force, the economy was improving and

the protest vote could now go to other blocs (Yulia Tymoshenko, the Socialists, Our Ukraine). The KPU is the only party which has a high negative rating of approximately 50 percent to match its stable popularity of 20 percent.

What of the national democrats? In February 1992 they split into statist and anti-communist reformers, a split which has remained in place within Rukh and in the Ukrainian diaspora. Statists are more willing to broker deals with the authorities in the interests of the 'derzhava' and on a more practical level to obtain votes in eastern Ukraine. This alliance between sovereign communists turned oligarchic centrists and national democrats was able to thwart internal and external threats to statehood from the KPU and Russia respectively. But, it only held up until the Kuchmagate crisis of 2000.

1994-1998: Party of Power into Oligarchs

During this period the party of power dominated the reform process and converted its Soviet era political power into economic power. To control of the economy was added majority influence over television and, to a lesser extent, the print media. New parties were created or older ones were co-opted. These centrist parties were ideologically amorphous, created top down, forcibly enlisted members and were merely 'krishy' for business and regional interests.

1998-2002: Oligarchic to Authoritarian Regime

The entrenchment of the oligarchs politically and economically led to a decline in Ukraine's commitment to democratisation. During this period all CIS states drifted away from central Europe and the Baltic states who were advancing in their reform programs and integration with Euro-Atlantic structures. Ukraine's executive and oligarchs looked to

the archetypical CIS authoritarian, hybrid regime – not the West – as their preferred model because only it would ensure their survivability and control.

In early 2000 two steps were made to promote their position. The first was a velvet revolution to remove the left from control of parliamentary positions, which it had dominated since 1994. The national democrats supported this move as the left were still seen as more of a threat than the centrist oligarchs. This national democratic-centrist alliance was cemented by Viktor Yushchenko who was made prime minister in December 1999.

The second step was the referendum of April 2000. This the national democrats were less supportive of. The referendum aimed to convert Ukraine into the typical CIS presidential republic. Kuchma had wanted a Russian style super-presidential constitution in 1996 but had been thwarted. Ukraine (and Moldova) are the only two CIS states with strong parliaments.

2000- Collapse of Kuchma's Strategy and Political Crisis

The strategy collapsed with the start of the Kuchmagate crisis in November 2000. National democrats were already concerned at Ukraine's drift towards Russia with the sacking of Borys Tarasiuk as Foreign Minister the month before. National democrats wavered during the early Kuchmagate crisis while Yushchenko remained Prime Minister. Once his government was voted out through a joint vote of the KPU and oligarchs by parliament in April 2001 the centrist-national democratic alliance – which had been slowly disintegrating since November 2000 - ended.

The collapse of centrist-national democratic alliance ended an alliance that had been in place since 1990-1991 which had secured the strategy of state building. But, the

alliance had already been under threat even prior to Kuchmagate. In 1998-1999 radical national democrats already then backed Yevhen Marchuk's anti-Kuchma and anti-corruption presidential candidacy . His same supporters are today backing the populist Tymoshenko bloc. Viacheslav Chornovil, always on the anti-communist, reformist wing of Rukh which he headed, was also beginning to criticize Kuchma (he had always been a critic of Kravchuk when president). Perhaps this led to Chornovil's suspicious car accident in March 1999, one of eight such 'accidents' in post-Soviet Ukraine.

With the onset of Kuchmagate Ukraine's elites and population underwent a psychological evolution that has led to the crisis Ukraine is faced with today. Russia was no longer seen as a threat as it had recognized Ukraine's borders between 1997-1999. The far weaker KPU was also no longer a threat after it lost the second round of the presidential elections to Kuchma in November 1999.

A second psychological change was that the president should not be above criticism. Today, Kuchma has only a five percent popularity rating, 54 percent would like him impeached and over 70 percent support early presidential elections.

Who then was the major threat to Ukrainian statehood now? Kuchmagate led to one conclusion – centrist oligarchs and the executive. With statehood not threatened national democrats returned to the debates of the late Soviet era to ask themselves what they were building? Many in the statist wing of Rukh/Our Ukraine radicalised, particularly those from the cultural nomenklatura. By Kuchmagate the SPU had also evolved away from the KPU towards a more statist position, thereby allowing an alliance to form with Tymoshenko and anti-communist reformist national democrats.

2002 Elections: Oligarchs and Executive in Panic

The Kuchmagate crisis did not lead to a Ukrainian revolution. Ukrainians are not revolutionaries. Although 54 percent support opposition demands only 12-14 percent are willing to take their protest to the streets. During elections though, Ukrainians can be revolutionaries. In the 2002 elections nearly 60 percent backed the opposition while the ZYU and SDPUo only obtained 18 percent. The ideologically committed opposition four - Our Ukraine and Tymoshenko on the right, the SPU and KPU on the left - are pitted against the non-ideological centrist oligarchs and the executive.

Why is Ukraine different to all other CIS states? Ukraine has a large pro-Western, reform movement that is opposed both to the KPU and the former sovereign communists-oligarchs. This movement is based in western-central Ukraine, reflecting the close link between national identity and civic activism in Ukraine. This region had become more Ukrainian under the Soviet regime as Ukrainianization had gone hand in hand with urbanization and industrialization after 1945. These processes had also taken place in the 1920s in eastern Ukraine but had ended and reversed after the 1930s.

Eastern Ukraine was subjected to greater sovietization and russification, one outcome of which has translated into civic passivity. The region has remained passive throughout the late Soviet and post-Soviet era's. This factor turns on its head the assumption that civic activism is greater in urban centres, which are larger and more developed in eastern Ukraine. In western Ukraine a demographic Ukrainian majority is backed by cultural domination which assists civic mobilization. In eastern Ukraine a demographic Ukrainian majority is not based on a Ukrainian cultural presence which translates into passivity.

This eastern Ukrainian passivity provided the base in the late Soviet era for sovereign (national) communists and today it provides the same service for oligarchic

centrists. Oligarchs do not exist in western Ukraine. The SDPUo - which unites the Kyiv clan - could only obtain support in eastern Ukraine in the 2002 elections, but not in Kyiv itself. Oligarchs in revolt – Pavlo Lazarenko and Tymoshenko – have therefore had to go in search of allies to western Ukraine. Marchuk’s populist nationalist supporters in 1999 are today supporters of Tymoshenko.

Ukraine’s Crisis Deepens

The crisis has deepened because Ukraine has returned to many of the same questions it faced in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet eras. The former sovereign (national) communists turned oligarchs saw the Soviet Ukrainian SSR and the independent Ukrainian state as their personal property to do with as they saw and see fit. They are unwilling to give up power for this psychological reason and because to do so might lead to their physical destruction. Under Kuchma Ukraine’s campaign against corruption was always virtual. But, Ukraine’s anti-corruption legislation could be implemented by an ideologically driven president, such as Yushchenko.

The crisis has also deepened because Ukraine, like the remainder of the CIS, has no tradition of compromise to facilitate a Polish-style round table. Trust in institutions and pro-executive politicians is at an all-time low. The Kuchmagate crisis has destroyed any possibility of a Russian-style organized succession in 2004. No pro-Kuchma oligarch has any popularity, especially at a level that could match Yushchenko’s stable rating of 25-30 percent. If held now, the second round of a presidential election would be a contest between Yushchenko and Symonenko with Yushchenko winning.

In the international arena Ukraine’s crisis has worsened because of Kuchma’s semi-isolation since Kuchmagate. 2001 was the first year in which there was no US-

Ukrainian presidential summit. Lazarenko is on trial in the US on money laundering charges. And, worse of all, Ukraine was accused of sending military technology to Iraq. Ukraine is now threatened with complete isolation.

This international aspect of Ukraine's crisis affects its prospects for NATO and EU integration, which is now at an all time low. Russia has become the main beneficiary of Kuchma's domestic problems. Since 2000 Ukraine has progressively re-aligned itself with Russia. Oligarchic groups defined such a policy as To Europe with Russia! Cynics would say such a policy would be better described as Never Joining Europe with Russia! because Russia has never expressed any interest in EU or NATO membership, unlike Ukraine.

Conclusion

Ukraine is in crisis because its successful national revolution needs to be complimented by a democratic one. The former sovereign (national) communists turned oligarchs are totally discredited but able to hang on to power because of a passive eastern Ukraine and their control of the security forces.

As Ukraine approaches the 2004 presidential elections it is faced by a choice between two visions:

1. Yushchenko: Baltic-style democratic revolution where domestic policies back up the foreign goal of returning to Europe.
2. Kuchma Candidate: authoritarian, hybrid CIS style regime resting on little public support, virtual campaigns against corruption and other domestic Eurasian policies that contradict the virtual goal of returning to Europe.

