

# Nationalism and Democracy in Ukraine

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The rise of freedom and democratization in post-Cold War Europe, while perhaps the single most positive international development in the twentieth century, has engendered countless challenges in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. One of the daunting tasks includes ridding society of the deeply embedded economic and political ills engendered by the 70-plus years of communist rule. Last year, Czech President Vaclav Havel delivered a speech in the United States, in which he attempted to describe the root causes of the difficult transitions confronting post-communist societies. He stated that, "Communism was far from being simply the dictatorship of one group of people over another. It was a genuinely totalitarian system, that is, it permeated every aspect of life and deformed everything it touched, including all the natural ways people had evolved of living together. . . . It was a perverted structure . . . but society nevertheless internalized it, or rather was forced to internalize it."<sup>1</sup>

Given this difficult legacy, it is not surprising that where freedom has abounded unbridled, in some cases pent-up political and social forces have been violently unleashed. Obviously, a civic culture, democratic values, and tolerance cannot be established overnight. It takes time for a society to build a moral foundation and evolve democratically. According to President Havel, in the interim "radicalism of all kinds" and the "hunt for scapegoats" run rampant, animated by what he characterized as a "vast shroud of uniformity under communism, stifling all national, intellectual, spiritual, cultural and religious variety."<sup>2</sup> That is, after being subjected to decades of the sameness—with all creativity being suppressed by the state—many felt the need to manifest in both positive and negative ways, their own uniqueness and differences. This is one of the fundamental reasons for the blossoming of ethnicity and many versions of nationalism on the continent.

While the causes of post-Cold War resurgent nationalism are comprehensible, its impact on the European continent and on democratic growth therein remain at best uncertain and quite complex. To some, nationalism is inherently ethnocentric and, consequently, threatens ongoing democratic consolidation in Eastern and Central Europe and the rights of ethnic minorities. Indeed, this kind of nationalism can cause "extreme" or "malignant" social and political consequences, suppressing, often brutally, other cultures for the sole purpose of strengthening its own. This form of biased, intolerant behavior debases the notion of nationalism and becomes indistinguishable from imperialism. The proponents of the view that this is what post-Cold War nationalism is all about are not lacking in vivid examples. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, nationalism has been manipulated by petty tyrants, has produced atrocities on a scale unseen in Europe since World War II, and has been portrayed by the Western media as a negative phenomenon.

Others argue, however, that nationalism is a unifying force that can reinforce a country's sovereignty and identity as well as instill a strong sense of community and

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patriotism. According to Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia, “the problem is not nationalism as some isolated force, a mad demon that must be chained, but rather the general weakness of democracy in post-communist lands.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, democracy can be strengthened by a healthy dose of nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Despite the Bosnian carnage, this view reflects a more predominant trend in Europe. With this debate in mind, let me now focus on the situation in a key Central European country—Ukraine.

### **Historical Background of Nationalism in Ukraine**

To appreciate fully the rise of nationalism in Ukraine, it is necessary to consider these trends within an historical context. On the banks of the Dnieper River in Kiev stands a statue of the city's founders—Kiy, Shchek, Khoriv, and their sister, Lybid. It is a reminder

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of the birth of a city and the growth of a nation at the vital strategic and commercial crossroads of Eurasia. Kiev—besieged on many occasions by barbarians, Westerners, and fellow Slavs—is a proud symbol of Ukraine's determination to survive and prevail.<sup>5</sup> Most Ukrainians view the past as a story of repeated brutal efforts to subjugate their country, primarily on the part of Russia, but also involving Poland, Austria-Hungary, and Ottoman Turkey. Indeed, Ukraine's history has been a record of

betrayals, exploitations, suffering, and partitions. This process of victimization was relieved only by two very brief periods of genuine independence: the Zaporizhian Sitch (1648-1654), when the Zaporizhian Cossacks were governed by an elected leader, Hetman Bogdan Khmelnytsky, and 1918-1920, while the Russians were engaged in a civil war of their own. Cardinal Myroslav Lubachivsky put it well when he said, “Ukraine today is a nation trying to shake off the legacy of centuries of imperialism and occupation. Its goal is to be a just nation for all its citizens—whatever their ethnic background.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite centuries of foreign domination and recent periods of ruthless Russification, Ukrainian culture and identity has thrived. In fact, nationalism in Ukraine has been a motivating force and has helped sustain a sense of pride, patriotism, and commitment to statehood. These forces also contributed to the eventual cohesive evolution toward Ukraine's independence in 1991 and have buffeted Kiev against a prevalent view in Moscow that Ukraine's independence is a temporary aberration. Clearly, one cannot discuss Ukrainian nationalism without taking into account the historical positive influence it has had in the preservation of a Ukrainian identity.

### **The Economic Dimension**

In examining the state of nationalism in Ukraine today, we must consider two dimensions: ethnic and political. That is, does nationalism in Ukraine inevitably mean the emergence of a pronounced ethnocentric bias, intolerant and hostile to minorities and the imposition of a single superior culture and language to the exclusion of all others? Also, does Ukrainian nationalism manifest itself through political extremism? The simple answer to both of these questions is no.

Since the declaration of its independence in August 1991, Ukraine has been struggling to survive. Its economy has been in a state of crisis; Crimea continues to be a political hotbed; and Moscow's intentions toward Kiev, at best, are unclear. Yet, despite these difficulties, Ukraine has succeeded in maintaining peace and stability. Indeed, contrary to expectations, Ukraine, a country of 52 million—72 percent ethnic Ukrainians, 22 percent Russians, and 5 percent other minorities—with divergent East/West attitudes on economic development, remains a home to ethnic and cultural diversity.

Ukraine has launched a liberal policy toward its minorities, has created appropriate institutions to deal with these issues, and has enacted rather progressive legislation protective of ethnic rights. To cite just a few examples:

— On 16 July 1990, the Kiev Supreme Soviet passed a Declaration on the State Sovereignty of Ukraine which “guarantees all nationalities that reside on the territory of the republic the right to national-cultural development.”<sup>7</sup>

— In October 1991, the Ukrainian Parliament (Rada) enacted a law on Ukrainian citizenship, which declared that all persons resident in Ukraine at the time of the law's passage were Ukrainian nationals. In other words, residency is not predicated on one's ethnicity.

— Upon independence, Ukraine also passed a landmark piece of legislation that distinguishes it from all other countries in the region. The Law on National Minorities was adopted by the Rada on 25 June 1992. Some of the significant provisions include the following: government support will be provided to assist ethnic minorities and all national minorities are guaranteed “the right to national-cultural autonomy; use of and instruction in [their] native language, in state educational institutions or through national cultural societies; the use of national symbols; the practice of their religion; and the creation of national, cultural and educational institutions.”<sup>8</sup>

— And finally, to ensure the fair implementation of this law, Ukraine established in 1993 a Ministry of Nationalities and Migration, the only such existing federal body in the former Soviet Union.

In addition to both the passage and implementation of legislation protecting minority rights, the Ukrainian government has undertaken other concrete positive steps to reassure Russians, Jews, Crimean Tatars, Romanians, Hungarians, and Poles, among others, of their rights. For example, individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds have been appointed to prominent government positions and Kiev has forged good relations with those countries, such as Poland, Israel, and Hungary, whose co-nationals are important minorities in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

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Overall, compared to other European countries, Ukraine has one of the most advanced policies in dealing with ethnic minorities. Not surprisingly, despite certain internal pressures, Ukraine has not experienced ethnic violence. An early and leading advocate of minority rights and outspoken proponent for independence has been Rukh, the Popular Movement of Ukraine for Restructuring. From birth, the Rukh movement sought to encourage a strong sense of national identity, and simultaneously promote tolerance and

democratic growth. Through their efforts, Rukh has countered propaganda that Ukrainian nationalism is inherently biased and hostile to minorities.

For example, a piece of scurrilous journalism, which has been protested by Rukh, Ukrainian-Americans, and many others, was aired on *60 Minutes* called "The Ugly Face of Freedom." This segment focused on Ukrainian-Jewish relations in western Ukraine and featured prominently allegations that Ukrainians are anti-Semitic. These kinds of baseless allegations not only distort Kiev's record but also contribute to exaggerated negative images of nationalism. Significantly, according to Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, the Chief Rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine, "Ukraine has an excellent record in human rights. The revitalization of the Jewish community in Ukraine, which has become the strongest and most flourishing Jewish community in the former Soviet Union, is but one example of the bright side of freedom and democracy in modern Ukraine."<sup>10</sup>

During Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma's visit to the United States in November of 1994, he held meetings with leaders from the Jewish American community organizations in New York and in Washington at the Holocaust Memorial Museum. He strongly asserted that Ukraine has "once and for all put an end to state-sponsored anti-Semitism—the shameful legacy of the tsarist and Soviet periods" and pledged to take every appropriate action against any anti-Semitic activity. The president acknowledged that among those criminals who perpetrated the Holocaust, "there were individual Ukrainians, or more exactly degenerates, who are unworthy of the name 'Ukrainia.' These were individuals, and many of them were punished by their own people during the war and in the post-war period." Yet, Kuchma pointed out that there were also many Ukrainians who helped the Jews during this period of horror. According to the president, these Ukrainians "were the true exponents of the Ukrainian national character—exponents of its best traits: goodness, humanity, bravery and endurance."<sup>11</sup>

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of minorities, Kiev has been generally successful in dealing with their demands. However, given the recent economic legislation submitted by President Kuchma to the Ukrainian Parliament and the expected hardships and lowered standard of living to be endured, severe political and economic pressures will be felt by the Ukrainian people. Specifically, on 11 October 1994, President Kuchma announced and submitted to the Rada his economic program entitled "The Path of Radical Economic Reforms."

His plan calls for trade liberalization measures, private ownership of land, the creation of a stable currency, and strict monetary policies and guidelines implemented by an independent National Bank. In addition, privatization of the majority of state property is cited as an important goal. Already, the president has acted upon his program by targeting more than 8,000 state enterprises for privatization by the end of this year, liberalizing prices, reducing trade restrictions, and eliminating the fixed currency exchange rate. These measures, although necessary, will place an added strain on society.

During his 1994 visit to the United States, Ukraine's President Kuchma called for additional economic assistance and a financial safety net to enable Ukraine to advance its economic reforms. He cautioned that the chances for east/west confrontation will escalate unless Ukraine addresses and resolves its economic problems. In both Crimea and eastern Ukraine, large segments of a heavily Russified and Russian-speaking, although not necessarily ethnically Russian, population voted for Ukraine's independence in 1991 in order to improve their economic conditions. With the Ukrainian economy in a virtual free-fall, their loyalty is being severely tested.

Moreover, in the July presidential elections, Kuchma received overwhelming support from Crimea and the east/south areas of Ukraine. In Crimea, he won almost 90 percent of the vote based on his campaign promise to improve Ukraine-Russia relations and Crimea's standard of living; in eastern and southern Ukraine, he was also the favored candidate with almost 70 percent of the vote due to his above-stated platform. Clearly, as a result of his economic reform program, his electoral base will be hard hit. Highly subsidized industries such as coal mining are located in precisely those areas which heavily supported Kuchma. In the short term, his popularity will enable him to pursue such a rigorous economic reform program. But it is quite unclear how patient Ukrainians will be and when his time will run out.

Overall, it remains to be seen whether Ukraine will be able to sustain its evenhanded policies under these trying economic circumstances and cope with the diverse needs expressed by the minorities themselves. It also remains to be seen whether tensions among the various ethnic groups will be heightened due to economic problems.

### **The Political Dimension**

Significantly, economic factors aside, in Ukraine nationalism is not equated with political extremism. Although ultranationalist groups exist in western Ukraine and a few of their representatives have been elected to Parliament, political extremism has been present only at the margins of Ukrainian politics and has not impacted the newly independent Ukrainian state.

The Ukrainian far right is primarily identified with the Ukrainian National Assembly (UNA) and especially its paramilitary arm, the Ukrainian People's Self-Defense Organization (UNSO). Ultranationalism emerged in western Ukraine during the interwar period and grew when Ukraine failed to consolidate its independence during the 1918-1920 period. One of the platforms espoused by the UNA and UNSO features "integral nationalism"—the belief that Ukraine is just for Ukrainians.

Importantly, their views and policies have not taken hold and represent a minority. However, should Ukraine's independent statehood and territorial integrity be threatened from either internal or external forces, the ultranationalist groups are likely to react forcefully and attempt to mobilize the public behind them. An outbreak of violence could potentially occur. Such a scenario cannot be ruled out. Yet, with the election of Leonid Kuchma as president, the chances for Ukraine remaining stable and unified on Ukrainian statehood have been enhanced.

### **U.S. Policy and Kiev's Response**

Ukraine is geostrategically important to the United States. A country the size of France, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Ukraine provides a large and effective buffer zone

serve as a bulwark against a resumption of post-communist Russian misbehavior in Eastern Europe. Conversely, if Ukraine collapses into chaos and internal violence, it would worsen the prospects for stability and democracy in Russia and other adjacent countries. Given the long common border, the likelihood that the disorder would spread into Russia would be high. Moreover, Ukraine is at present the third largest nuclear power in the world. To the extent that the United States is serious about handling the problem of nuclear proliferation, Ukraine must figure prominently in its calculations.

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For these reasons, the United States needs to pursue a coherent and effective policy toward Ukraine. It would be tragic if our failure to pursue a sound policy, designed to ensure Ukraine’s independence, would bring about the greatest geostrategic reversal in human history—the reconstitution of the Soviet Union, even if stripped of its former ideological trappings.

Fortunately, since 1994, the scope and pace of U.S.-Ukraine relations have been broadened. For example, U.S.-Ukrainian economic ties have been expanded; a Joint Commission on Trade and Investment has been established to lower trade barriers and promote investment; \$50 million in Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) funding has been made available for investment projects in Ukraine in FY 1994; and an Enterprise Fund has been created to generate business investments in Ukraine and promote the growth of indigenous small to medium size businesses. Other areas of heightened bilateral cooperation include: aerospace, science and technology, civil aviation, agriculture, defense conversion, energy, environment, and culture. In March 1994, former President Kravchuk visited the United States and in August, Vice President Gore made a trip to Ukraine. The Clinton administration made the right decision to accord President Kuchma a state visit in November 1994. Not to do so would have sent a wrong signal to Kiev, especially after Russian President Yeltsin had been greeted at the state level.

Washington should continue to engage Ukraine politically, economically, and militarily. At the same time, it should encourage Ukraine to implement President Kuchma’s comprehensive economic reform program and provide relevant technical assistance. Any assistance promised must be delivered. Kiev has complained of not receiving U.S. resources that were earmarked for Ukraine. This has elevated Ukraine’s expectations, is not helpful to the tenor of our bilateral relations, and must be addressed urgently.

And the United States, which has already acted as an engaged and scrupulously fair broker in negotiations between Moscow and Kiev over nuclear weapons, should expand this approach to include other contentious Russia-Ukraine issues. The United States also needs to support Ukraine’s efforts to anchor itself firmly within the Western security and economic architecture. For example, the Partnership for Peace (PFP) should be imbued with some substantive content in the form of both staff and field services, involving NATO troops and troops from Ukraine, Poland, and the Czech Republic. While large-scale military assistance programs would be controversial at this time, there is a variety of low-key ways to help Kiev with training, equipment maintenance, and modernization, as well as the development of doctrinal concepts and force planning. Other Central European democracies should cooperate more with Ukraine in the military sphere.<sup>12</sup>

Ukraine's international standing can also be enhanced through its involvement and participation in regional and international organizations such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the United Nations. The creation of a civil society and the establishment of rule of law are also imperative to Ukraine's independence. For these reasons, we should support the development of democratic and free market structures. The work of the National Endowment for Democracy and private sector organizations in Ukraine should be especially noted and assisted. Through their efforts, programs for political party development have been designed, internships for young Ukrainian journalists have been set up at American newspapers and television stations, education fellowships have been established at American universities and law schools, exchanges of young scholars or parliamentarians have been arranged, and business workshops have been created. Significantly, these programs have targeted indigenous Ukrainian grassroots organizations and Ukraine's younger generation. They also have had a multiplier effect on encouraging Ukraine's democratic growth and entrepreneurial spirit.

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The situation in Ukraine is critical, and with its newly elected leadership, the chances for progress are much enhanced. Kiev can ensure the sovereignty and even the prosperity of Ukraine if it adopts a strategic vision capable of inspiring the nation. That vision must be of a Ukraine which is a key central European nation and an important stakeholder in Western economic and security systems, and at the same time enjoys a constructive relationship with Russia.

An active, balanced U.S. policy could bolster these prospects. Washington must continue to make clear, publicly and privately, the importance it attaches to Ukraine being not only a prosperous democracy, but a sovereign and independent state with inviolable borders. But ultimately, the fate of Ukrainian independence will be decided in Kiev.

### **Nationalism Revisited**

In conclusion, it is appropriate to return to the broader theme touched upon earlier—the impact of nationalism on democratic and political trends in Europe. In this writer's view, the Ukrainian experience helps temper the sense of pessimism about nationalism that has been engendered by the Bosnian conflict. Several simple lessons can be drawn from developments in Ukraine over the last several years. To begin with, it helps to have reasonable leaders, who do not seek to foster jingoism as a way of bolstering their political power. Here, the contrast between the leaders in Belgrade and Kiev cannot be greater. This is not to say that nationalism, if not warped by the deliberate governmental stimulation of inter-ethnic hatreds, can never by itself produce communal violence. However, it rarely, if ever, brings about the total political and social anarchy that we are witnessing today in Bosnia. Second, not all nationalist tensions are created equal. To state the obvious, the tensions between Russians and Ukrainians are much more muted than tensions between Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Serbs. In general, ethnic tensions become much more dangerous when reinforced with strong religious or racial animosities. Third, ethnic

tensions rise and manifest themselves in more confrontational forms when economic conditions worsen and political fissures among different societal groups grow.

To summarize, instead of being mesmerized by the ugly manifestations of nationalism run amok in Bosnia, we should strive to pursue a policy that capitalizes on the positive aspects of nationalism. From that perspective, in essence, by pursuing a policy designed to pursue political stability, economic growth, and democratic principles in newly created democracies, we would be ensuring that the course of national developments in these countries takes proper shape.

### Notes

1. George Weigel, "Hawks and Doves Revisited," *American Purpose* (May-June 1993): 36.
2. *Ibid.*, 37.
3. Ghia Nodia, "Nationalism and Democracy" in *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Democracy*, ed. Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) 20.
4. *Ibid.*, x-xi. Ghia notes that "the idea of nationalism is impossible—indeed unthinkable—without the idea of democracy, and that democracy never exists without nationalism. The two are joined in a sort of complicated marriage, unable to live without each other, but coexisting in an almost permanent state of tension." He argues quite convincingly that "the core of democracy is the idea of popular sovereignty—the notion that the will of the people should prevail."
5. Paula J. Dobriansky, "Ukraine: A Question of Survival," *The National Interest* 36 (Summer 1994): 65-66.
6. Cardinal Myroslav Lubachivsky quoted in *The Ukrainian Weekly* (6 November 1994), 6.
7. Susan Stewart, "Ukraine's Policy Toward Its Ethnic Minorities," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 10 September 1993, 55.
8. *Ibid.*, 56-57, see text of *Holos Ukrainy* (16 July 1992).
9. Orest Deychakiwsky, *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 2 October 1994, 9.
10. Statement released by Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, *The Ukrainian Weekly*, (6 November 1994), 6.
11. See Kuchma quotes in *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 4 December 1994, 6.
12. Dobriansky, "Ukraine: A Question of Survival," 72.