

# UKRAINE: East-west break-up fears are overdone

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EVENT: Donetsk regional council decided yesterday that it would hold a referendum on autonomy next month.

SIGNIFICANCE: This move follows Sunday's congress attended by Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich and local councils in east Ukraine, which called for autonomous status. The congress highlighted the regional divisions between east and west that have surfaced during the presidential elections. It prompted reports raising the spectre of Russian-backed secession in the style of Moldova's Transnistria -- Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov attended the congress.

ANALYSIS: During presidential elections on October 31 and November 21, west Ukraine voted overwhelmingly for opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko, while east Ukraine, even allowing for electoral fraud, largely backed Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich ([see UKRAINE: Authorities prepared to face down opposition - November 23, 2004](#)). To an extent this reflects historic divides (west Ukraine was outside the Soviet Union until 1945) and linguistic differences (Ukrainian predominates in the west and centre, Russian in the east and south). In the tense post-election crisis, demands for autonomy from Donetsk have added to fears that Ukraine is on the verge of civil war or about to break up.

Such fears, and the extent of the division between east and west Ukraine, are exaggerated. During President Leonid Kuchma's decade in office, regional divisions have in fact declined considerably. Notably, separatism in Crimea collapsed in 1995, and in 1998 the autonomous republic obtained a new constitution that recognises Ukrainian sovereignty. Although regional tensions remain, their apparent prominence at present owes much to their accentuation during the elections by the Kuchma-Yanukovich camp, which used a wide array of tactics developed by Russian political advisers to 'blacken' Yushchenko.

The strategy was twofold:

- Yushchenko was denied positive television coverage on state television and private channels controlled by oligarchs loyal to Kuchma and Yanukovich.
- Soviet-style propaganda portrayed Yushchenko as an 'extremist', 'fascist', 'anti-Russian' and 'US puppet'. One component was a Soviet-style anti-American campaign that targeted Yushchenko, whose wife is American ([see UKRAINE: Anti-Americanism an election tool for Kuchma - January 9, 2004](#)).

In addition, Soviet-style demonisation of west Ukrainians re-emerged. These tactics have been partially successful -- east Ukrainian voters fear a Yushchenko victory because of his alleged 'anti-Russian' stance.

Regime fears. However, the reluctance of the Kuchma-Yanukovich camp to cede power owes more to two other factors:

- The pro-regime centrists hail from the former ruling elites of the Soviet Ukrainian nomenklatura. They look upon Ukraine almost as their patrimony, believing that only they have a right to rule the country.
- Kuchma and his allies fear a Yushchenko victory because of a wide array of crimes they are accused of -- election rigging, corruption, arms trafficking and violence against journalists and politicians. Evidence available from this election campaign (Ukraine's dirtiest) have reinforced these fears.

Autonomy bid. These high stakes led to the holding of the autonomist congress. Yanukovych feels betrayed by his allies in Kyiv (including Kuchma), who have failed to back him to the end and are instead looking for another way out of the crisis ([see UKRAINE: Opposition gains upper hand but risks remain - November 29, 2004](#)). The threat of Donbas secession may be intended to give him additional leverage, and ensure that his Donetsk clan is not ignored in any final deal with the opposition.

Participants in the congress did not call for separation from Ukraine, only for the creation of a 'South-Eastern Autonomous Republic'. However, thus far only Yanukovych's home base of Donetsk has stated its intention to hold a referendum, in January.

Narrow base. This reflects the fact that, although the congress claimed it was representing all south and east Ukraine, most of the regions -- including Crimea, Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson and Dnipropetrovsk -- have refused to back it. Industrial giants in Zaporizhzhia and Mariupol also refused to support autonomist moves.

The Dnipropetrovsk clan is headed by Serhiy Tyhypko, who was in charge of Yanukovych's election campaign. On Monday, he resigned from this position and as governor of the National Bank. Kuchma may be planning to replace Yanukovych with Tyhypko as the regime's candidate in repeat elections, promoting him as a 'compromise candidate' (although it is highly unlikely that the opposition would support him). Tyhypko condemned the autonomist congress.

Most city councils in south and east Ukraine, where opposition forces have some support, also condemned the congress. Other regional governors who initially backed it began a day later to backtrack -- notably Yevhen Kushnariov, Kharkiv regional governor. Kushnariov's initial support for the referendum was condemned by Kharkiv's city council, while his own political party, the People's Democrats, voted with the opposition for Saturday's parliamentary resolution that condemned the second round elections as invalid.

Lack of legality. It is still unclear if the referendum will go ahead. Donetsk Governor Anatoliy Blyzniuk has ruled out autonomy or separation from Ukraine. If Donetsk does proceed with a referendum, it will have no legal standing. The region held a similar poll during the 1994 presidential election, to no effect. Ukraine has permitted Crimea to create an autonomous republic because it is the only Ukrainian region with an ethnic Russian majority. The creation of a second autonomous region in Donetsk would require changes to the 1996 constitution. It would be impossible to find the 300-plus votes to permit this -- the Donetsk faction would not be supported even by other pro-Kuchma factions, such as Labour Ukraine.

Yanukovych losing support. The autonomist congress further undermined Yanukovych's support in Kyiv. Kuchma, Defence Minister Oleksandr Kuzmuk, and Parliamentary Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn condemned steps towards autonomy or separatism. The Security Service and Prosecutor's office have been ordered to investigate the demands made at the congress (described by Lytvyn as "unconstitutional") under the Criminal Code.

Since the congress, Yanukovych's patriotic credentials, especially within the security forces, have been tarnished. This partly explains why many have defected to Yushchenko (some were already uneasy at the prospect of a commander-in-chief who had a criminal record). The emergence of evidence that Yanukovych's election team colluded with the presidential administration in massive election fraud has further damaged his reputation.

Relations with Russia. President Vladimir Putin's overt intervention -- both in the elections themselves and, through Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, in moves for Donetsk separatism -- could make relations between Ukraine and Russia worse in the event of an opposition victory than would otherwise have been the case. Yushchenko himself is not anti-Russian. However, many of

his supporters now blame Russian political advisers for dividing Ukraine, and also believe that Moscow was behind the alleged poisoning of their candidate in early September. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the majority of whose diplomats declared for Yushchenko after round two) condemned Luzhkov's presence at the Donetsk congress, and called in Russian embassy officials in Kyiv, who were given stern warnings.

**CONCLUSION:** The threat of a break-up of Ukraine is exaggerated. Demands for autonomy status in Donetsk reflect anger at the failure of the local candidate, Yanukovich, to gain the presidency, and perhaps Yanukovich's need for leverage. However, legal obstacles, such as changing the constitution, would rule out the creation of a Donetsk autonomous republic. Any referendum results in favour of this outcome will be ignored, as in 1994.

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