

END NOTE

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN UKRAINE: EXPLAINING  
THE YUSHCHENKO PHENOMENON

By Taras Kuzio

Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko entered Ukrainian politics on a national scale when he moved from chairman of the National Bank to prime minister in December 1999. During his government's 18-month tenure he oversaw Ukraine's emergence from a decade-long slump and paid off wage and pension arrears. A survey of different Ukrainian opinion polls conducted between June 2001 and January 2002 showed that Yushchenko's popularity ratings remained between 18-30 percent.

Western commentary has focused primarily on Yushchenko's personal popularity and has ignored why this popularity has not been transformed into a nationwide mass movement. In other words, why has Yushchenko not become a Ukrainian equivalent of Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) head Vojislav Kostunica, who was able to mobilize both democratic and nationalist anticommunist mass opposition to former President Slobodan Milosovic in October 2000? Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma is as unpopular as Milosovic was, and yet the opposition newspaper "Vecherniye Vesti" compared Ukraine unfavorably to Yugoslavia and asked, "What kind of people would put up with discredited rulers? Are we worse than the Serbs?"

In Ukraine, the creation of a similar mass movement is made more difficult because of the national question that prevents Yushchenko and his Our Ukraine bloc from capturing the same levels of high support elsewhere in the country that it already enjoys in western and central Ukraine. A November-December 2000 International Foundation for Electoral Systems poll found that approximately the same number of ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians suffered as a result of a decade of social change. Nevertheless, only 26 percent of Russian respondents in the poll said they trusted Yushchenko, compared with 45 percent of Ukrainians. This gap in attitudes along ethnic lines was not reflected in attitudes toward President Kuchma, who was trusted by 31 percent of Ukrainians and 22 percent of Russians (the poll was conducted before the "Kuchmagate" scandal erupted in November 2000).

In the late Soviet era, the national democrats in Ukraine were strong enough to propel the country to independence, but not to take power. In the '90s they were nonetheless able to prevent Ukraine from fully sliding into authoritarianism, a regression that has been the norm in the remainder of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The opposition movement that grew up during the Kuchmagate scandal was based in the same regions as the anti-Soviet, nationalist movement of the late Soviet era, namely western and central Ukraine.

If the Ukraine Without Kuchma movement had been able to mobilize

countrywide support, as Kostunica did in Serbia, it is doubtful that Kuchma would be still in power today. But, as in the late Soviet era, eastern and southern Ukraine remained passive. As Russophile activists Mykhailo Pogrebynsky and Vladimir Malynkowitz bemoaned in a roundtable convened at the Russian newspaper "Nezavisimaya gazeta" in April 2001, civil society is closely linked to national identity in Ukraine. Consequently, an active civil society only exists in western and central Ukraine, while the east is passive. Eastern and southern Ukrainians only become involved in politics in the run-up to national elections when their more numerous votes in regions such as the Donbas with its 10 million population are sought after by election blocs.

Because the national democrats were not able to take power in Ukraine they were therefore unable to ensure that Ukraine undertook the "radical reform and return to Europe" strategy adopted by the three Baltic states and post-Milosovic Serbia. Instead, Ukraine has muddled along with "third way" and "multivector" policies favored by the former Soviet Ukrainian elite-turned-oligarchs.

The only way Ukraine can escape from these confused policies is through the creation of a broad reformist movement, such as Our Ukraine, that combines a patriotic, anticorruption, and socioeconomic platform. For the first time since the late Soviet era, the Communist Party and its leader Petro Symonenko have been pushed into second place by Our Ukraine and Yushchenko. But, as in the late Soviet era when they allied themselves with the "sovereign communists," national democrats have today been forced to compromise by forming a tactical alliance with the centrists. The major difference between the late Soviet era and today is that Our Ukraine has for the first time expanded the reach of national democrats into eastern and southern Ukraine, the traditional preserve of the Communist Party and the oligarchs.

The link between national identity and civil society that makes Ukraine so different from Yugoslavia is reflected in a January poll by the Ukrainian Center for Economic and Political Research (UCEPS). Unsurprisingly, Our Ukraine is strongest in western and central Ukraine, where it commands 51.9 and 20 percent support. These are the only two regions where Our Ukraine has pushed the Communist Party into second place. In the north, east, and south Our Ukraine's popularity drops to second place after the Communist Party with 9.5, 7.9, and 11.6 percent respectively.

The two radical antipresidential Yuliya Tymoshenko and Oleksandr Moroz's Socialist Party election blocs are more geographically restricted to western and central Ukraine. The Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc, although led by a party with its origins in the eastern Ukrainian city of Dnipropetrovsk, is only popular in western and central Ukraine, while the Socialists are confined to Ukrainophone central Ukraine. Opposition newspapers, such as Tymoshenko's "Vecherniye Vesti," are only able to obtain printing facilities in Western Ukraine.

Western and central Ukraine are the strongholds of the opposition movement against Kuchma and the oligarchs. According to the UCEPS poll, seven blocs would pass the 4 percent threshold for the 225 seats elected by proportional voting. In western Ukraine only four of these seven would pass the threshold, and of these Our Ukraine and the Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc top the list. In central Ukraine, seven blocs would pass the threshold, of which the top four are national democratic or in the

opposition camp (Our Ukraine, Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc, Kyiv Mayor Oleksandr Omelchenko's Unity, and the Socialist Party bloc).

For a United Ukraine, the bloc favored by President Leonid Kuchma that includes five "parties of power," would not pass the threshold in either western or central Ukraine. In Kyiv, a city with a large number of state officials, For a United Ukraine would only manage to scrape through with 4.3 percent.

National identity, reform, and civil society are closely linked in Ukraine, as they are in other postcommunist states. Ukraine's regional and linguistic divisions inhibit national integration and a civil society encompassing the entire country. Meanwhile, the more pervasive Soviet legacy in eastern and southern Ukraine has led to a passive population and a weak civil society. This, in turn, prevents Yushchenko's Our Ukraine from becoming a mass movement throughout Ukraine in the same manner as Kostunica's DOS in Serbia. The popularity of Yushchenko's Our Ukraine in Western and Central Ukraine reflects the region's role as Ukraine's main engine for reform, a bastion of opposition to the Communist Party and oligarchs, and preventing a further slide to authoritarianism.

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