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Political Perestroika and the Rise of the Rukh: Ukrainian Nationalism, 1989-90

Scott Copper

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Introduction

The Soviet Union without the Ukraine may never have become a superpower. The Ukraine’s fertile soil, situated in a relatively mild climate, has been breadbasket to Russia for almost four centuries. Its rich mineral resources provided much of the coal and iron necessary for Stalin’s industrialization, and its millions of skilled workers provided much of the manpower. In fact, Roman Szporluk points out that, because Great Russians make up only about 52 percent of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainians and Byelo­ russians (between them compromising 20 percent of the population) are the crucial, marginal factor which allows continued Slavic domination of the diverse Soviet empire (1986, 153). Without their cooperation, the empire would be too unwieldy and unstable.

Precisely because of the Ukraine’s importance, any nationalist or separatist feeling within the Ukraine must be taken seriously. Soviet historians attempt to minimize the differences between Russians and their Ukrainian kin. The Communist Party officially predicts and proclaims the gradual merger of the two nationalities into one people (Chirovsky 1984a, 17). In spite of this, the Party has been unable to stamp out Ukrainian nationalism, even by extreme methods. And in the Gorbachev era nationalist feeling has exploded from hiding, apparently only strengthened by centuries of Russian domination and decades of Soviet oppression. This paper will trace the development of this nationalist feeling in order to show how historical factors have led to recent, dramatic changes in Ukrainian politics. I will focus especially on this feeling of nationalism, to the exclusion of economic factors, in explaining Ukrainian political change. While economic factors are obvi-
ously a critical element in recent events, space restrictions prevent me from discussing these factors in any detail.

**Kievan-Rus’ and Polish Rule**

The Ukraine first existed as the Kievan-Rus’ state, which reached the peak of its territorial expansion under Prince Vladimir one thousand years ago. Vladimir ruled virtually all of the European portion of the present-day USSR, from the Black Sea in the south to the White Sea in the north, and from the Danube in the west to the Volga basin in the east (Chirovsky 1984a, 124). But, because of its size, Vladimir's empire proved too weak to survive, although he tried to unify it by Christianizing his subjects. In the years 1236 to 1240 the weakened kingdom was thoroughly conquered by the invading Mongols. One hundred years later, the weakened Mongols were displaced by a Lithuanian-Rus’ commonwealth. But the commonwealth was short-lived; in 1385, Lithuania united with a stronger Poland and ended Rus' sovereignty. Also at this time, the name "Ukraine" (literally, "at the edge") emerged because of the nation's position at the border of Europe and Asia.

Catholic Poland ruled the Ukraine for almost three centuries but was bitterly resisted by the Orthodox Ukrainian nation. Poland exploited the Ukraine's resources and population without preventing attacks by Crimean Tatars and other invaders from the East (Chirovsky 1984b, 28-29). The result of this unrest was the emergence of the Cossacks, groups that fled Polish rule for the vast steppes of the eastern and southern Ukraine, which were free of foreign domination. By the mid-1500s these Cossacks had elected a "hetman" as their leader and considered themselves autonomous. This Cossack state is the historical source of modern Ukrainian nationalism. The memory of this period of autonomy has driven twentieth century nationalists to seek greater freedom from Moscow.

**Bohdan Khmelnytsky and Russian Rule**

The year 1648 marked the triumphant peak of the Cossack state; Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky destroyed the Polish army and declared the Ukraine a sovereign state. As usual, however, Ukrainian independence was short-lived. By 1654 continued war with Poland had weakened the Ukraine dramatically and Khmelnytsky was forced to form an alliance with the newly emergent Muscovite Empire. Ukrainian historians claim that Khmelnytsky's 1654 treaty with Russia was merely a military alliance (Chirovsky 1984b, 183), but for over three centuries Russian and Soviet leaders have interpreted the treaty as a complete Ukrainian submission to Moscow.

Russia, as the stronger power, was able to interpret the treaty as it saw fit, despite Ukrainian protest. Ukrainian autonomy gradually decreased until, from 1763 to 1783, Catherine the Great introduced serfdom to the Ukraine, tying the peasants to the land. The next century and a half of tsarist rule failed, however, to "Russify" the Ukrainian people; history had given the Ukraine a taste of autonomy and independence which tsarist restrictions could not overcome.

**Bolshevik Rule**

Upon seizing power in 1917, one of the Bolsheviks' first acts was a "Declaration of
the Rights of the Peoples of Russia," which granted sovereignty and even separation to the Russian Empire's nationalities (Dmytryshyn 1977, 485). The Ukrainian Rada (or parliament) in Kiev established an independent Ukrainian Peoples Republic within days. The next two years saw bitter civil war in the Ukraine, which was alternately controlled by the Bolshevik Red Army, Germany, Ukrainian nationalists, the White Army, and finally by the Red Army. In 1921 the Ukraine was split between Poland and Russia and on December 30, 1922, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, with its capital at Kiev, entered the Soviet Union.

By the mid-1920s, Mykola Skrypnyk, a Ukrainian Bolshevik who advocated the "Ukrainization" of the republic, was the dominant political figure in the Ukraine. Although his power was limited, he was able to increase the number of Ukrainians in the party elite, the use of the Ukrainian language in political life, and the number of books and newspapers published in Ukrainian (Mace 1983, 305). This limited Ukrainization, however, was terminated by Stalin by 1932. Skrypnyk was denounced and committed suicide. The forced collectivization of 1932-33 crushed the Ukrainian peasantry and the accompanying famine left millions dead.

The Ukrainians' next brief taste of freedom came when Nazi troops "liberated" them during World War II. The Ukraine soon turned against the oppressive German rule and fought the Germans until the Red Army returned to the Ukraine in 1944—at which point the Ukrainian nationalists turned their weapons against the communists. Bilocerkowycz states that anti-Soviet guerilla activities continued until 1950, with isolated attacks as late as 1956 (1988, 20).

Since Stalin

Since Stalin's death, nationalism has been expressed mainly through the dissident movement. These dissidents have called for increasing Ukrainian autonomy and Ukrainization as well as for basic human rights. Each of the postwar communist leaders of the Ukraine has treated dissent harshly; the dissidents of the post-Stalin era have faced lengthy jail sentences, forced exile, and "psychiatric treatment." But the dissident movement has survived. Bilinsky even suggest that the crackdowns have only produced "professional oppositionists" who have survived labor camps and returned to dissent (1983, 9).

Between 1953 and 1976 both the First and Second Secretaries of the Ukrainian Communist Party have been Ukrainians. Even more importantly, the Ukrainian First Secretary has been on the Soviet Politburo since 1953. Thus, the traditional importance of the Second Secretary of the non-Russian republics has diminished in the Ukraine: each of the First Secretaries (Shelest, Shcherbitsky, and Ivashko) has been even more powerful than his Second Secretary. Almost all of the top positions in the Ukrainian party, government, and KGB have been filled by Ukrainians. As mentioned previously, Ukrainians fill a crucial role in the continued Slavic domination of the Soviet Union. In fact, the Ukraine actually "exports" cadres to Moscow rather than importing them (Gustafson and Mann 1988, 37). This obviously implies that the Ukrainians have attained a high amount of trust in Moscow. But Motyl also points out that moving a Ukrainian party official to Moscow has the added advantage of separating him from any independent power base in the Ukraine, "preventing the formation of a
native--autonomous--Ukrainian elite" (1987, 123).

This policy of isolation has not been entirely successful though. In the 1950s, Pyotr Shelest managed to form a strong power base from which he pushed for greater Ukrainian sovereignty within the Soviet Union and for cultural individuality, much as Skrypnyk had done in the 1920s. His Ukrainization led eventually to his replacement in 1972 by Vladimir Shcherbitsky, who also established an independent power base. Shcherbitsky, however, was strongly pro-Russian and an enemy of Ukrainization.

Shcherbitsky’s success shows that Ukrainian communists are useful to the Soviet regime; Shelest’s removal shows that those same Ukrainian communists must tread carefully to avoid offending Moscow. Ukrainian nationalism is anathema to Soviet leaders, even when mixed with a heavy dose of communism. Up until the Gorbachev period, the Ukraine and the Ukrainian Communist Party were tied firmly to Moscow. Even though the various republics are constitutionally sovereign states, "their sovereignty seems to be limited only in all the areas in which they might want to take action" (Hough and Fainsod 1979, 483).

Gorbachev and Perestroika

Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power has obviously brought unprecedented change to the Soviet Union. But initial change came very slowly to the Ukraine. Ruled under the iron fist of longtime Ukrainian Party leader Vladimir Shcherbitsky, the Ukraine was among the most conservative republics. Shcherbitsky’s grip was not even loosened by the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. Long after Gorbachev had removed all other Brezhnev-era members of the Soviet Politbu-
from the Soviet Union—but they seemed to unite in the recurring chant, "Shcherbitsky . . . Resign" (Komsomolskaya Pravda 1989, 2). Their common platform demanded greater changes in the Ukrainian economy, concern for the environment, and development of the Ukrainian culture (Izvestia 1989, 3).

Ivashko

The unification of such a broad range of opposition groups mortally wounded Shcherbitsky's power base. Within weeks of the Rukh congress, Gorbachev was able to remove Shcherbitsky from the Soviet Politburo and, one week later, from the head of the Ukrainian Party. His replacement was Vladimir Ivashko, a protege of Shcherbitsky, who nonetheless saw the need for economic reform. He offered to help Rukh obtain legal status and to cooperate with the nationalists as long as they refrained from advocating secession from the USSR (Keller 1989b, A13). In this way he hoped to moderate Rukh's most extreme demands.

Unfortunately for Ivashko, events were already moving rapidly, especially in the western Ukraine which had been free of Soviet rule until World War II and which was less Russified than the eastern portion of the republic. Frequent demonstrations continued and in late October more than one hundred peoples' fronts from all over the USSR met at Chelyabinsk to discuss the democratization of the Soviet Union. One writer called the meeting "a people's Duma that is trying to sum up and express all the opinions in our society," referring to the tsarist Duma, a sort of weak parliament (Zhavoronkov 1989, 13). Each new demonstration and each new meeting and organization put further pressure on Ivashko and Gorbachev to make more radical changes.

The year 1989 had marked a turning point in Ukrainian politics. Popular unrest had led to greater liberalization and to the fall of the Ukraine's party chief. But the underlying problems were not resolved and Ivashko too would prove unable to stem the rising flood of public anger and disillusionment.

1990 Elections

The republic-wide elections of February and March, 1990, shifted the political balance in the Ukraine. The odds were stacked fairly heavily against Rukh: It could not officially nominate candidates because it was not recognized in time by the government, it was not allowed to publish its own newspaper, and the Communist Party was able to guarantee safe seats to many of its own officials (Keller 1990, A12). In spite of these difficulties, Rukh-approved candidates managed to win one-fourth of the seats in the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet. Also, Ivashko and many other senior communists were unable to win on the first ballot and were forced into run-off elections. By contrast, many Rukh leaders won on the first ballot, including several former political prisoners representing the Ukraine Helsinki Union (Keller 1990, A12). Ivashko eventually, but not easily, retained his seat and was elected chairman of the republic's parliament, making him head of both the Ukrainian Party and government.

In July, Ukrainian miners provoked a political avalanche by threatening another strike. Their basic demands included the resignation of the government (because of its failure to carry out the promises of the previous year) and the removal of the Party
from economic decision-making (Izvestia 1990, 1, 3). The Ukrainian parliament, with many of its conservative communist majority in Moscow for the Communist Party Congress, felt itself unable to deal with the strike and so it ordered all missing members to return to Kiev immediately (Tsikora 1990a, 2). The majority returned but Ivashko, as a Politburo member and a key figure in the Party Congress, was unable to return. Criticizing both the parliament’s order to return and those communists in the Ukrainian parliament who had supported the order, Ivashko resigned his chairmanship of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet (while retaining his leadership of the party).

Sovereignty

His replacement, Leonid Kravchuk, the Second Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party, was not elected for two weeks. This interval saw remarkable changes in the Ukraine. On July 16, 1990, the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet overwhelmingly declared (355 to 4) the republic’s political sovereignty (Clines 1990a, A1). In startlingly clear language, parliament claimed the "supremacy, independence, fullness, and indivisibility of the republic’s power on its territory and its independence and equality in external relations" (Clines 1990a, A10). The declaration claimed for the Ukraine the right to its own citizenship; the right to control its own natural resources; the right to create its own financial, currency, and economic systems; the right to annul laws passed in Moscow; and the right to control troops on its own territory (Pravda 1990, 2; Clines 1990a, A1, A10). The Ukraine did not claim full independence, but its declaration was reminiscent of the sovereign Cossack state of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The New York Times noted that the "declaration was crafted to reflect the Ukraine’s rich history of centuries of dynasty and principality, when Kiev was a major political, commercial, and cultural center" (Clines 1990a, A10).

The declaration of sovereignty marked the Ukraine as one of the most radical of the Soviet Union’s fifteen republics. Only the three Baltic republics have gone further and claimed the right to secede from the union. It is important to note the near unanimity of the vote, indicating that both communist and Rukh delegates to the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet saw the need (or felt the public pressure) for radical change. The fifteen republics will soon be negotiating a new treaty of union with Moscow and the Ukraine appears to have staked out a rigid negotiating position. It remains to be seen whether Gorbachev has the power to force compromise on the republics.

These steps towards sovereignty, however, proved only the prelude to even greater demands. With store shelves consistently empty, the Ukrainian discontent continues to grow. On September 30, Rukh and other nationalist groups held a huge procession and rally in downtown Kiev. Izvestia reported that over one hundred thousand people attended, making it the largest such unofficial rally held in Kiev in the post-World War II era (Tsikora 1990b, 1-2). The next day saw the beginning of a republic-wide strike which, although it included only a fraction of the republic’s workers, increased the perception of discontent. The Ukrainian Supreme Soviet certainly must have noticed. The following day’s events added to the pressure: Policemen and protesters clashed near the Supreme Soviet building, leaving twenty demonstrators and fifteen policemen injured (Tsikora 1990c, 2).
Student Protest

A small group of students escalated the situation one step further in early October. As an outgrowth of the relatively unsuccessful work stoppage, about two hundred students started a hunger strike in a tent city they had constructed in Kiev’s central plaza, at the very feet of the imposing statue of Lenin. (Somewhat ironically, the plaza is named the Square of the October Revolution.) The hunger strike mushroomed into republic-wide student protest. Tens of thousands of students travelled to Kiev in support. Colleges across the city and republic were barricaded and closed by students refusing to attend classes. Demonstrators in other cities voiced their support. According to the *New York Times*,

The student demonstration appeared to provide what Rukh and other opposition outlets had not yet been able to apply, a simple focus, with doctors dramatically measuring the hunger strikers’ health, for venting dissatisfaction with the communist status quo and its hard economic times (Clines 1990b, A4).

The student demands increased the radicalization of Ukrainian politics. Criticizing the only-partially democratic elections of the previous spring, students called for a republic-wide referendum on whether or not to dissolve the parliament and hold new elections. This referendum would in effect be a vote of confidence in the parliament (Reuters 1990, A6). The hunger strikers also demanded a new constitution implementing the July declaration of sovereignty, laws allowing Ukrainian military recruits to serve on Ukrainian soil, confiscation of the Communist Party’s vast property holdings, and the resignation of the Ukraine’s Prime Minister, Vitaly Masol (Clines 1990b, A1, A4).

Two weeks later, the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet accepted most of the demands. Prime Minister Masol agreed to step down and the Supreme Soviet agreed to a new constitution, a referendum on dissolving parliament, and a law keeping Ukrainian troops in the Ukraine. In short, they agreed to begin putting into law those rights claimed in theory in July. This will certainly meet with opposition in Moscow, increasing the Ukraine’s conflict with Gorbachev. In addition, a substantial portion of the Ukrainian population opposes these changes. This group includes not only communists with a stake in the status quo but also ethnic Russians worried by an increasingly anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism. Finally, the student protest has forced Rukh to further radicalize its own demands (Clines 1990b, A4). Previously Rukh had avoided calling for outright independence (although some groups under the Rukh umbrella had done so). Now, in order to stay in the lead of public opinion, Rukh fully endorsed complete independence from the USSR.

Conclusions

Lenin remarked once that "for us to lose the Ukraine would be the same as losing our head" (Keller 1989b, A13). An observer viewing the Ukraine in 1985 might have assumed (as many did) that the Ukraine had no strong nationalist feelings and the Ukrainian and Russian nations had virtually become one. With the exception of a few dissident groups, the Ukraine seemed passively content with its role in the Soviet state. Recent events, though, have proved this view false. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Ukrainian nation exists and remembers its past independence, however short-lived. And seventy years of commu-
nist repression has only deepened that feeling. The explosive nature of that sentiment surprised both Western and communist observers—including Mikhail Gorbachev. Today, Ukrainian public discussion is almost controlled by nationalist voices. The dismal economic situation fans the flames of dissent. Even the communist-dominated parliament has rebelled and demanded greater freedom and autonomy than Moscow appears willing to offer. Unless Gorbachev is able to neutralize the Ukraine’s current momentum, the Soviet Union may have to learn to live without its head.

Gorbachev does have a few remaining cards to play though. First, the Ukrainian parliament, although rebellious, is still controlled by Communist Party members with a personal stake in the status quo. Second, the Ukraine’s sizable Russian minority and the Russification of the eastern Ukraine provide a check on any thoughts of independence. Third, the powers of the state, especially the Army, are still controlled by Moscow, giving Gorbachev very real leverage in overcoming rebellion. Will Gorbachev resort to such drastic measures to hold the Soviet Union together? It appears increasingly possible that he or some other Soviet leader will face just such a choice in the Ukraine in the not-so-distant future.
WORKS CITED


