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UKRAINE AND RUSSIA: THE ROLE OF THE UKRAINIAN EAST,
AND THE ELECTIONS

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Abstract: The recent parliamentary and presidential elections in Ukraine have aroused much anxiety. The resurgence of the Communists poses a realistic threat to the independent Ukraine. Yet the new president Kuchma has made no move to undermine independence. The Ukrainian east, the political base of the Communists and Kuchma, appears to be groping for a new Ukraine, independent yet coexistent with Russia.

It seems opportune to reflect on the parliamentary and presidential elections in Ukraine now that their results are in and the heat of the excitement and anxiety over them have subsided. A number of observers have commented on the immediate significance of these elections, but as a historian, I shall focus on the long-term trends affecting current developments in Ukraine. My main intent is to emphasize the importance of eastern Ukraine in the future of the country, and to put the elections in perspective.

In Ukraine as in the West, the eastern region of Ukraine, a heavily Russified land that has long been under Russian (Soviet) rule, is often described as a problem child. Its accommodating attitude toward Russia marks a sharp contrast with Western Ukraine, where the fierce spirit for independence from and even hostility toward Russia is to a large extent conditioned by a different historical legacy. (Western Ukraine did not come under Soviet rule till 1939-1945.) Many have feared a possible breakup of Ukraine between east and west. Both the parliamentary and presidential elections appeared to underscore such fears. Yet the elections may well have saved Ukraine, at least for the time being, from further deadly conflict. Here the role of the east in Ukrainian politics looms large.

The elections legitimately raised much concern both in Ukraine and in the West about the comeback of the former Communists. The left (regrouped Communists and socialists) emerged as the largest faction in the new Ukrainian parliament; the new president, Leonid Kuchma, a Russophone Ukrainian, has come to power with a promise of greater cooperation with Russia, and with the support of the left (part of which even advocated a resurrection of
a Soviet Union). It was the east (and to a lesser extent the south, also significantly Russified) that played a decisive role in the results of these elections: the east (particularly the heavily industrialized and Russified Donbas) overwhelmingly voted for the left and Kuchma. The mere fact that the east has a much larger population made its influence keenly felt in these elections. The independence of a newly independent country appeared legitimately threatened.

It is easy to forget that it was against the Communists that the workers in eastern Ukraine struck repeatedly in 1989-1991 and that only two years ago the east, like the rest of Ukraine, overwhelmingly supported the independence of Ukraine. Many commentators, both Ukrainian and Western, have expressed much concern about the east’s betrayal, yet Kuchma has made no move to undermine independence. In my recent trips to the region (particularly the Donbas) I have not found any strong popular sentiments indicating betrayal. Virtually everyone cursed the politicians, but no one contended that independence was a mistake. Everyone, including ethnic Ukrainians, complained about the stupidity of forced linguistic Ukrainianization but no one, including ethnic Russians, denied the need to study the Ukrainian language. Many stressed the need to have closer relations with their neighbor (Russia), but no one called for a unification with Russia. These attitudes seemed to be shared by many strata of the population. In other words, support for the former Communists does not necessarily mean a wish for the restoration of the old order.

In fact, if one takes into consideration the results of elections to provincial and local councils, the Communists, even in the east, did not necessarily fare well at all. These elections have to be analyzed in great detail. A preliminary analysis of Donetsk provincial elections, for example, reveals that party affiliation carried little weight: people tended to vote for the candidates who happened to be listed at the top and the bottom of the candidate platform!1

Still one should not underestimate the votes cast in the national elections for the left in the east, nor can the political and economic threat of Russia to Ukrainian independence be

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1See "Nomenkatura oboshla na mestnykh vyborakh i 'levykh' i 'pravykh,'" Donetskii kriazh, no. 77 (29July-4 August 1994), p. 2.
ignored. This danger is particularly important to Ukraine, not simply because of its geographical proximity to Russia, but also because Russia still has a hard time swallowing the idea of an independent Ukraine. As seems to be the case in other east European states, however, the comeback of the left does not necessarily spell the restoration of the ancien regime.

It is clear to the people of eastern Ukraine that Ukraine, as a neighbor of Russia, cannot separate itself entirely from Russia in the economic sphere. Almost everyone in the Donbas maintains that independence, if it means no relations with Russia, would be a great mistake. People appear angry with Kiev, which mismanaged the economy. The subsequent economic collapse in turn opened Ukraine to bullying by Russia whose economic resources are far greater than those of Ukraine. People in the east seem to believe that economic ties with Russia would be mutually beneficial.

In my many conversations with people in Ukraine (both ethnic Ukrainians and Russians), I emphasized that Canada, an independent country of a common origin with the United States, cannot separate itself economically from the United States. (Here I am aware of the Quebec problem, of course.) I also added that Ukraine need not aspire to be a superpower, just as Canada does not and yet lives relatively well and more or less harmoniously and mutually beneficially with its superpower neighbor (however grudgingly). The language issue, while important, need not become a divisive issue. In Ireland and Northern Ireland, for example, almost all nationalists speak English. Ukrainization is desirable and legitimate, but forced Ukrainization is a threat to the integrity of the Ukrainian nationhood. My "advice" was well received in the east, while in Kiev people listened to me even though they may not have agreed with me.

The Russian problem is a potential political bomb. The grave concern evident in Western Ukraine is legitimate. The brutality with which the Soviet regime once incorporated the Western Ukraine makes its population suspicious of any ties with Russia. Closer ties with its western neighbors (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia) may be the better solution, just as the American and Canadian west has prospered with strong economic ties to the Pacific Rim countries. Nevertheless, eastern Ukraine's stronger ties with Russia are not ipso facto a danger to the prosperity of Ukraine.
Clearly, political hegemony in Ukraine has moved, for the time being, from Kiev and the west to the east. Such a configuration is not necessarily new in Ukrainian history. In fact, the awakening of modern Ukrainian national consciousness started in the Russified east and moved to the west. The east is more populous and has more economic resources than the west, and is likely to play a critical role in Ukraine’s future. Western observers have long identified Ukraine with the Kiev-L’viv axis, but it is time to take the east seriously, not just as a suspect Russian outpost, but as a potential source of a stable and prosperous multiethnic Ukraine.