TITLE: UKRAINE AND THE CRISIS IN THE DONBAS

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UKRAINE AND THE CRISIS IN THE DONBAS

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Abstract
The acute crisis in the Donbas accounts for President Kuchma’s rapid decline in popularity there. Kiev should not take the crisis lightly. The youth are suffering as much as any other social group. But there is reason for optimism as well: the youth, in particular, confronted by the brutal reality of the times, have been forced to come to grips with it.

The recent accord between Ukraine and Russia over the Black Sea Fleet seems to have strengthened the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine. True, the Crimea still remains a thorny issue, and Russia’s War in Chechnya has caused some anxiety and concern in Ukraine about Russia’s imperial ambitions. Yet, even with regard to the Crimean issue, the Kremlin, unlike the vocal Russian nationalists, has shown little intention of encroaching on Ukrainian sovereignty. Having acquired a degree of international security, Kiev appears to be intent on developing a bold plan for the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. Kiev seems to have recognized that a crumbling economy is more dangerous than the perceived Russian threat. Its efforts to restructure its bankrupt economy have won Kiev a substantial sum of Western aid, and more is expected for Ukraine.

The eastern region of Ukraine, particularly the industrial center of the Donbas, is critical to Kiev’s efforts to restructure the country’s economy. Kiev faces formidable political problems in this region, traditionally a political hot spot.

As many observers have noted, it was eastern Ukraine, including the Donbas, that made it possible for Kuchma to be elected President in 1994; yet it was also this region that, within a few month, rapidly began to withdraw support from Kuchma. Instead Kuchma eventually became more popular in the western regions of Ukraine than in the east.

Many in western Ukraine may have misunderstood Kuchma’s apparent pro-Russian stance during the election campaign, presuming that the Russophone Kuchma would succumb to Russian pressure for the reintegration of the former Soviet republics. As I followed the
campaign in Ukraine last summer, I understood clearly that Kuchma’s commitment to Ukrainian independence was firm. It was hardly surprising to this author that in the end the western regions of Ukraine, the foremost concern of which is understandably an unequivocal independence of Ukraine from Russia, came to reverse their position and support the new President.

If Kuchma has turned out to be a pleasant surprise to many in the western Ukraine, to people in the eastern region he appears to be trapped in the independence game in Kiev. Some in the Donbas openly and angrily declare that they have again been deceived by politicians. They believe that Kuchma has reneged on several campaign promises: he has failed to make Russian a state language along with Ukrainian, to keep the borders with Russia open, and to establish a customs agreement (union) with Russia. It is not clear whether Kuchma has completely abandoned these policies.

No doubt, closer relations with Russia would ease some of the tensions in the industrialized east. Once Kuchma consolidates his power, he may implement some measures for closer relations with Russia. Both Western and Ukrainian observers often tend to see the European and the "Eurasian" (referring to "Russian") orientations of Ukraine in opposition. Yet in economic terms, they should not constitute a dichotomy, just as it would be a mistake for the United States to oppose its Atlantic and Pacific economic interests. Closer economic ties with Russia would help both western and eastern Ukraine.

The problem for the Ukrainian east is that there is no guarantee that economic difficulties would disappear if Kuchma’s promises were kept. Just as many in Ukraine believed four years ago that once Ukraine became independent of Moscow, all would go well, people in the east now have the illusion that were the old relations with regions across the border restored, all would be fine. It is hardly a secret, however, that life in Russia’s provinces is little better or easier than in Ukraine.

There is evidently much anger and disappointment in the Donbas. People in the Donbas believe that their economic contribution to the state is unfairly large in comparison to the western regions. This sentiment is not without basis as much of Kiev’s export (steel, raw
material, machinery, arms) comes from the east. The apparent lack of compensation for their contribution adds to their anger.¹

The Donbas residents want to believe, again not without basis, that their work and living conditions are the worst in the country and therefore deserve special attention. Indeed, in some critical areas, entire regions are in near catastrophic situations. According to recent statistics, the Donbas with its large coal mining industry accounts for 82.3 percent of all work-related accidents and ailments in the country. In one coal field (Luhans’k Coal, or Luhans’kvyuhillia), according to the Ministry of Labor, work-related physical disorders have increased by 100 times (sic) this year over last!² Reports of dysentery, typhus, and other serious epidemics abound. One has to take these data with a grain of salt, because statistics are often a convenient tool for political manipulation. But no one disputes that, sadly, the Donbas is representative of Ukraine’s worst economic and social woes.

The Donbas has been so politically volatile that President Kuchma can hardly ignore its interests. Unfortunately, there is no easy solution.

The plight of the pensioners and workers (particularly the colliers) has frequently been pointed out in both the Ukrainian and Western press. Yet equally serious is the life of the youth. Unlike their parents or grandparents, they cannot look back on the Soviet (pre-perestroika) past with nostalgia because they are too young to have memories of it. The misery of life has destroyed many families and contributed to an overall increase in crime. Life has become more brutal than before. There are reports that hungry children and youngsters in Luhans’k eat dogs, cats, and hedgehogs.³ Ominous rumors circulate of parents selling their children, and even of cannibalism.

All of this misery contrasts sharply with the lavish life style of the few nouveaux riches who, most people suspect, have acquired their wealth in dishonest ways.

The crisis helps the anti-Kiev, pro-Russia (Soviet) forces in the Donbas. There is no strong indication yet, however, that the Donbas as a whole is turning against the

¹For one of the most forceful discussions on this point, see the interview with Vadim Naumov, a prominent writer, in Donetskii kriazh, no. 13 (112), 31 March-6 April 1995.

²"Chy povynen skalichenyi shakhtar oplachuvaty borot’bu z inflatsiiieiu?,” Kyivs’ki vidomosti, 16 August 1995, pp. 1 and 8.

³See, for example, Luganskaia pravda, 15 July 1995.
independence of Ukraine. The majority of the population, as any visitor to the area will notice, seems to be too tired and too disgusted to care about politics. They despair that no one speaks for them: "Dostoevskii is dead, Solzhenitsyn is in Russia, Strelianyi [a former political prisoner] is free, and Draches and Pavlychkos are building an independent Ukraine."\(^4\)

It is evident to Kiev that the Donbas is a trouble spot. If Kiev is to carry out a fundamental economic reform, a significant part of the obsolete Donbas industry has to be closed, thereby multiplying the holes in the social safety net. The Donbas problem represents, in an extreme form, the problems that Ukraine and, for that matter almost all of the former Communist block countries, face.

One sees what may be interpreted as an optimistic sign in the Donbas, however. The younger generation, with little nostalgia for the Soviet past when the individuals had no choice but rely on the government, knows that one has to work to make a living. Sometimes working means committing crime, which is a serious problem, but the younger generation seems to take for granted the demise of the old system and the harsh reality of a new regime.

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