TITLE: THE DONBAS IN UKRAINIAN POLITICS

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THE DONBAS IN UKRAINIAN POLITICS

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In this brief commentary on the current (June 9) political scene in Ukraine the author discusses the shift of President Kuchma’s popularity to the western areas from the east, and special situation, and problems of the Donbas which will pose the most serious economic and political problem for Kiev in the transformation of Ukraine.

Ukraine seems to be on a steady course toward becoming a stable democracy with a promising economy. Since last autumn, Ukraine has been granted a number of Western aid packages: several hundred million dollars from the IMF; $500 million from the World Bank; 300 million ECU from the European Union and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; $900 million from the United States, among others. They will give Ukraine a much needed financial base for the stabilization of its currency. Indeed, inflation, once rampant, now seems to be under control. What appeared to be the most difficult internal problem, the Crimean issue, may also be close to a happy solution brought about by the agreement reached last week (June 9) between Ukraine and Russia. Even though the accord may not resolve all of the complicated issues related to the Crimea, President Kuchma appears to be deft at handling them.

To the surprise of many observers who expressed anxiety last summer when the Russophone Kuchma was elected president by the support of the heavily Russified eastern regions of Ukraine, Kuchma is now more popular in western Ukraine than in the east. According to a poll conducted on June 1, President Kuchma got a vote of confidence from 57.7 percent of those surveyed in L’viv, the central city in western Ukraine, but only 32.1 percent in Donets’k, the capital of the Donbas industrial region in eastern Ukraine. Kuchma’s position appears even stronger when seen in contrast to the Parliament which enjoys dismal
support among the Ukrainian population: 10.3 and 12.7 percent in the respective cities.¹ Kuchma’s popularity in western Ukraine is remarkable given the fact that he got less than 4 percent of the vote a year ago in the presidential elections. His determination to keep Ukraine independent as well as his success in securing western aid are among the most important reasons for this notable turnabout.

Equally remarkable is the rapid loss of confidence in his government in the eastern regions, particularly in the Donbas where he received more than 80 percent of the vote in the presidential election. What accounts for his decline in popularity? One reason is Kuchma’s failure to keep his campaign promise of making the Russian language a second official language. Yet there is a more important factor to consider.

Many people to whom I talked in the Donbas last summer shortly after the presidential elections expressed doubt in both candidates (Kuchma and Kravchuk). Kuchma, according to them, was more desirable than Kravchuk, but things would not get much better under Kuchma. While cynical, people expressed a flicker of hope. What they hoped for under Kuchma was economic improvement: a closer economic integration with Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, they felt, would put the Donbas economy back in shape. Their expectations were not without precedent. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the centrally planned economy, with all its serious shortcomings, kept the local economy going. The restoration of a centrally planned economy was out of the question, but they hoped that the recovery of the lost links of supply and demand would help to recover their economy deep in crisis.

As it turned out, Kuchma did not or could not articulate ways by which to improve the ties between the Ukrainian economy and the Russian economy; nor did Russia show much interest in Ukraine’s weak economy. Consequently, Kuchma’s presidency has not led to any improvement in the local economy. It is evident that in the long term, closer economic ties

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¹The Ukrainian Weekly, no. 23 (4 June 1995), p. 19. Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain the details of the poll. Kuchma obtained only a 12.2 percent vote of confidence in the Crimea because of his strong measures against its autonomy. What impact last week’s Ukraine-Russian accord has had on the political mood of the Crimean population is not known yet.
between the two countries will benefit both. The Ukraine-Russia accord may turn out to be a step in the right direction.

Yet even if Ukraine does transform its economy radically into a market economy, the people of the Donbas do not foresee immediate benefits. Although some mines and steel mills will survive and may even thrive, the majority of old industrial plants, particularly the majority of coalmines, will close if Ukraine comes to rely on oil and natural gas as its main source of energy. This is another reason for the anxiety obtaining in the Donbas. In fact, the decision to close some mines has already been made. Many mines are so inefficient that they are simply not viable economically. Like it or not, ties with Russia or not, the Donbas economy will have to change, just as many coal-and-steel towns in western countries have had to go through painful transitions in response to market pressure.

The question of how to transform the eastern industrial regions is of strategic importance to Kiev. Kiev may be tempted to accuse the Donbas of a lack of firm commitment to independence for Ukraine. However, in spite of a very large Russian population, there is little indication that the people of the Donbas, except for some vocal die-hard Communists, wish the restoration of the old regime.

In fact, the Donbas suffered under the old regime. It is often pointed out that the Donbas enjoyed relative prosperity under the old regime, with the colliers receiving much higher wages than scientists, professors, and other well-educated people. Yet it is often forgotten that miners worked under extremely dangerous conditions. Fulfillment of plan targets mattered more than the lives of workers to the local bosses, Kiev, and Moscow. People in the Donbas often contend that their industry is the most dangerous in the world and that their male life expectancy is the shortest and their infant mortality rate the highest in the country. It is not easy to confirm or deny these assertions, but the sense of total alienation from Moscow and Kiev is apparent. This, perhaps more than any other factor, has made the Donbas, particularly its colliers, strike-prone. It is also forgotten by contemporary commentators on Ukraine that in the 1970s the Donbas provided a large number of activists for the Free Trade Union movement to redress the sorry state of the working population in the Soviet Union. The movement was rejected by the capital’s intellectual dissidents who
even followed the government in suggesting that its leaders, many of whom were eventually imprisoned in psychiatric hospitals, were insane.

There is no easy way out of the economic difficulties in eastern Ukraine in general and the Donbas in particular. The transformation of the economy will be a painful process. The Donbas case is not entirely unique; all regions in the country will face more or less the same questions. Yet, apart from the Crimea, the strike-prone Donbas with its enormous yet fragile economy has posed and will continue to pose the most serious economic and political problem to Kiev. Kiev must pay close heed to the political mood in the Donbas in its effort to transform a bankrupt economy into a viable modern one.