TITLE: KUCHMA, KRAVCHUK, AND UKRAINIAN NATION-BUILDING: an Essay

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Recent political developments in eastern Ukraine suggest once again that Kiev regards eastern Ukraine as the problem child of Ukrainian independence. Indeed, the east appears to have rejected both the past and present presidents. It is easy to blame the east, but to do so exposes a contradiction in Ukrainian nationbuilding. Economic problems are what make the east so politically volatile at the moment. Scapegoating does not help Kiev.

A movement for the renewal of the Soviet Union is reported to be strong in the heavily-Russified eastern part of Ukraine. It was this area that rendered the strongest support to the Russophone Kuchma in the presidential elections last summer. Quite appropriately, President Kuchma has recently criticized the movement:

When I ran for president, I ran for president of the independent state of Ukraine, and I will do everything possible for Ukraine to become an economically strong, independent state.¹

He has in no way reneged on his election promise by this statement: he has consistently supported independent Ukraine. It was western Ukraine that, during the election campaign, expressed much doubt concerning Kuchma’s commitment to the independence of Ukraine. Yet, according to a recent poll conducted in Ukraine, President Kuchma "has greater popularity in western Ukraine than in the east, reversing the trend observed during the presidential elections."² What does this reversal mean to Ukraine and its future?

Many observers rightly point out that Ukraine consists of at least two very different regions. The west, until World War II, had never lived under Russian-Soviet rule, whereas the east had been part of the Russian (Soviet) Empire for nearly three and half centuries. The

¹The Ukrainian Weekly, 1995, no. 4, p. 1.
²Ibid., no. 5, p. 1.
difference in historical experience explains different political outlooks in the regions. The political stance of the west appears much more consistent than that of the east: the west has supported independence at all costs while the east’s stance seems to lack principle, kicking out and ushering in the Communists depending on political circumstances. The east, particularly the Donbas, often appears to the west to be a political mercenary.

The former Ukrainian President Kravchuk, who has recently been on a lecture tour in the United States, has every reason to loathe the east: it was the east that defeated him in the presidential elections. On several occasions, Kravchuk has criticized both the Ukrainian leaders and the Ukrainian people: "But our lordships, in Ukraine, as soon as difficulties begin, instead of putting themselves to work, begin looking for a master before whom they can prostrate themselves. They look for someone to unite with. / We lack a concept of nation, citizenship, love for the land one is prepared to give everything because it is yours"; "The people in our country are different [from other people], they speak the language the master speaks. For 70 years this was beaten into their heads." His criticism was clearly directed toward those in the east and their leaders who are supposedly without a concept of nation.

Yet Kravchuk’s remarks point out one important contradiction in Ukraine’s nationbuilding in the modern period. Ukraine and Russia spar on the question of who is the real heir to Kievan Rus’. Whoever the legitimate heir may be, the Ukrainians are fond of maintaining that their political culture is defined by a love of freedom and democracy while Russia and Poland, Ukraine’s two historical rivals, are characterized by despotism and aristocraticism respectively. Modern Ukraine’s historical claim to freedom and democracy is rooted in its belief in the Cossack origin as the foundation of its modern statehood. Modern Ukrainian national consciousness originated not in western Ukraine but in eastern Ukraine, where the Cossack traditions survived longest. Ukraine’s claim is not unfounded: the Cossacks were freedom-loving fighters who observed some democratic principles.

One should not forget, however, that the freedom fighters lived under a number of constraints. Most important, they lived in the borderland or the periphery. (The name

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2ibid., no. 6, p. 16, no. 5, p. 3.
Ukraine means "borderland." They had to contend with Russia in the north, Poland in the west, Turkey in the south, and a host of other foes to the east. They fought to secure their freedom by aligning themselves with powerful neighbors depending on the political situations. These practical tactics often made them appear to be political mercenaries. In other words, as Kravchuk has suggested, the Cossack myth, the core of modern Ukrainian nationbuilding, contains elements unfavorable to a truly independent nation.

No nation is free from contradictions in its myth of origin. Yet the traditional geopolitical constraints under which Ukraine has operated operate still in a somewhat modified form. However powerful Ukraine's Cossack myth may be as an organizing force, it alone cannot provide economic vitality. What turned the east against Kravchuk were grave economic problems. The same problems now have turned the east against Kuchma as well: his promise of economic vitality has not materialized yet.

Surprisingly, Kravchuk now seems to have shifted to the position Kuchma assumed regarding Russia during the election campaign. Kravchuk has insisted in his recent talks in the United States that "a turning away from Russia, despite the brutality of the invasion and clear examples of the violation of human rights [in Chechnia], would be a great mistake." Cutting off western aid to Russia would be a mistake, Kravchuk maintained: "the best outcome of the present crisis for Ukraine would be the stability of Russia."4

The movement in the east for the renewal of the Soviet Union does not augur well for the independence of Ukraine. Yet the danger from the east may have been exaggerated by certain politicians. The Chechen war has forced the east to reevaluate its position toward closer political relations with Russia. From the perspective of geographical proximity, the east has most to gain from close economic relations with Russia, but there is no strong indication so far that the east overwhelmingly wishes to be reunited with Russia. There is no guarantee that a shift toward Russia will not occur suddenly; nor can the west live in economic misery forever. This points to the supreme importance of speedy economic recovery in Ukraine at this moment.

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4Ibid., no. 6, pp. 4 and 16, no. 5, p. 3.