

Ukraine in 2002

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Introduction

In the area of today's Ukraine there is a tradition of foreign rule and of resistance to it. Before the Soviet period Ukraine had had only fleeting and unstable experience of autonomous statehood. In the twentieth century Ukraine was formed in stages, following the First and Second World Wars, on the ruins of collapsed empires. Ukraine gained territorial integrity for the first time as part of the Soviet Union, and won autonomy as a sovereign state only following the Soviet collapse in 1991.

This fitful formation has left a number of social and cultural marks on the republic:

Ethnic diversity

In countries like Romania the various ethnic groups are distinct, but in Ukraine there are cross-cutting differences among them. Many ethnic Ukrainians are bilingual, and many of them identify with Russian or Polish culture too. Some 72 per cent of the population are ethnically Ukrainian and 22 per cent ethnically Russian; 80 per cent of the population are bilingual. About half the people in the country speak Ukrainian as their language of preference and half speak Russian.

Regional diversity

The east is russified and industrial; there is an agricultural centre where Russian meets Ukrainian; and the west with its light industry is almost totally Ukrainian. There are other culturally specific regions such as Crimea (with its Tatars) and Transcarpathia (with its own separate Uniate church).

Religious diversity

Ukraine is also characterised by religious diversity. About 60 per cent of the population claim to be religious believers and about 25 per cent claim to be atheists. The rest say they don't know or refuse to answer. About 40 per cent claim to attend religious services as often as once a week, and most say they attend several times a year. About two thirds of the believers claim to belong to a particular faith. When asked what their religion is, these people give responses which fall into three broad categories:

1. Ukrainian Orthodox. The communist-era Orthodox Church has since independence divided into the Kiev and Moscow Patriarchates. The Kiev Patriarchate is the largest religious group, comprising nearly half

of all those who claim to hold religious belief. About 13 per cent of the total population describe themselves as belonging either to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) or the Russian Orthodox Church.

2. Uniate or 'Greek Catholic'. This church was created by the Union of Brest in 1596 as subordinate to the Pope in Rome but observing Orthodox rites. It was banned during communism. It comprises between a tenth and a fifth of the total number of believers and about five per cent of the total population.
3. Ukrainian Autocephalous. This church was also banned during communism. It comprises between two and five per cent of the total number of believers.

Questions relating to the privileges of the various churches, as well as to the ownership of church property, are heavily politicised, and religious affiliation is also closely linked with voting behaviour.

Efforts in some quarters since independence to create a single national church have been countered by those who think that Ukrainian pluralism should be nurtured as a virtue. I conducted a survey in 1998 asking which of several statements most closely reflected the view of the person being questioned. The questions and percentage responses were as follows:

- Ukraine and Russia should try to remain in the same church: 26.7
- Ukraine should have its own, single Orthodox church: 15.9
- There should be as many churches in Ukraine as the people want: 43.7
- None of the above: 3.6
- Don't know: 8.5
- No answer: 1.7

The Current Political Situation

During the decade since independence Ukraine experienced a period - roughly between 1991 and 1998 - of growing democracy but a declining economy. President Leonid Kuchma was elected in 1994 as representing western Ukraine and closer ties with Russia. He oscillated away from this orientation for a time, but has now returned to it. The debate as to whether Ukraine should look East or West is unresolved. In this context, we should note that former Russian prime minister Chernomyrdin has been Russian ambassador to Ukraine, and some complain that he has been acting like a Russian provincial governor.

Around 1998-99 the tide reversed; as the economy began to pick up, democracy began to falter. Since his re-election in 1999 Kuchma has been pushing at the bounds of constitutionality. He gradually used more authoritarian and corrupt means to consolidate his power and corrupt

business leaders strengthened their grip on politics. Ukraine was judged the ninth most corrupt country in the world in 2001 by Transparency International.

In constitutional terms Ukraine is a unitary state, though it has one autonomous region - the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Under the 1996 constitution Ukraine has what is formally a semi-presidential electoral system, with both a president and a parliament (like France and many of the other countries in the post-soviet world, including Russia, Poland and Yugoslavia). On paper it has a relatively strong separation of powers, with an independent Constitutional Court. But in practice, the president is the strongest player, and the position of the prime minister is ambiguous. Governments are not formed by parliament; it is the president who chooses his prime minister and other ministers. President Kuchma - elected first in 1994 and then again in 1999 - has taken various measures to concentrate power in the hands of his presidential administration and marginalise the parliament (the Verkhovna Rada):

- There was abuse of state resources during the 1999 presidential election.
- With a referendum of dubious legality in 2000 Kuchma tried to bypass the constitutional process by appealing directly to the people to impose an upper chamber (which he believed would do his bidding), to make it easier for parliament to be dissolved, and to introduce other measures to weaken parliament as an institution.
- Kuchma has used his decree powers liberally and has several times refused to sign laws which have been passed with a huge majority following his veto.
- Kuchma has used patronage and intimidation to politicise the civil service and to consolidate his power at the regional level. He has for example sacked governors of regions where the pro-Kuchma vote has not been strong enough, and has required civil servants to sign up their loyalty to particular parties.

This creeping authoritarianism came to a head in the autumn of 2000 when tapes were released on which Kuchma is heard saying things which implicate him in a variety of misdeeds, including the murder of a prominent journalist, Heorhi Gongadze, the rigging of the 1999 elections, and the breaking of the trade embargo against Iraq. The release of the tapes and the subsequent drama over trying to establish their authenticity led to a dramatic decline in public support for Kuchma and to a string of popular protests; these culminated in March 2001, when it appeared that Kuchma might actually fall from power. But he clung on, and the year since then has been more stable in political terms, with Kuchma fighting for the election of a friendly parliament, and the opposition focusing its power on working through the ballot box to elect an anti-Kuchma parliamentary majority.

The Parliamentary Election of 31 March 2002 and its consequences

Neither side was successful in the parliamentary election of 31 March.

There was considerable unease in the West about the increasingly abusive electoral practices witnessed in the presidential elections of 1999 and the referendum of 2000, which most observers believe to have been rigged.

The OSCE coordinated a mission of over 1000 delegates to observe the elections, and this helped to ensure that they were free and fair. In the runup to the election democratic procedures were in fact reconsolidated, although there was violence, with two deaths and other incidents, and protests during the elections about interference by Russia and the USA, both of which made comments on the elections, provoking the idea that Ukraine was a political football.

The Ukrainian electoral system is composed of two separate parts. Half (225) of the 450 parliamentary deputies are elected in single-member constituencies on a first-past-the-post basis, and half on proportional lists in a single nation-wide constituency with a four per cent threshold. The greatest concern in these elections was for the single-member constituency polls, which were perceived as being easier to corrupt. The Rada initially tried to change the electoral system to a fully proportional one, but Kuchma vetoed this move, as he did also a proposal to move to a 75 per cent proportional - 25 per cent majoritarian system.

There were three main forces in the election: 'Our Ukraine' (pro-market, pro-western, right-wing); 'For a United Ukraine' (the pro-Kuchma bloc of centrists, including members of the old nomenklatura and more or less corrupt business owners); and the Communists, who up to this year had regularly won the largest number of seats in elections. There was also a range of 'independents', but these are not normally dissenters; they tend to be local notables, chameleons who take on the political colour of the region they come from.

How to interpret the election results:

1. The election was effectively a referendum on Kuchma's rule, with parties lining up in the pro-Kuchma and anti-Kuchma camps.
2. The result was a hung parliament, with the anti-Kuchma camp 'Our Ukraine' winning more than any other party and the pro-Kuchma 'For a United Ukraine' winning only ten per cent of the proportional representation votes.
3. Though the anti-Kuchma forces command a majority, they are divided between left and right.
4. The prop-Kuchma camp commands the crucial centre ground (in ideological terms). We can thus expect to see a situation in which the left and the right will on some issues be able to come together to thwart the pro-presidential moves of the centre, but on other issues they will

be divided on ideological lines. This will lead to shifting majorities and unstable parliamentary politics.

5. Also of note is the fact that for the first time the Communists did not gain the largest number of votes.

Whither Ukraine?

The results of the 2002 parliamentary elections indicate that Ukraine has not slipped as far down the road to corruption and authoritarianism as some had feared prior to the polls. At the same time, the elections provide scant evidence that Ukraine is continuing to democratise, and we are unlikely to see any substantial moves in the direction of democracy so long as Leonid Kuchma remains president.