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A Survey of Developments in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine by the
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UKRAINE

* GROUP FIGHTING PUBLIC APATHY OVER CORRUPTION

* SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENCE RETURNS TO 1991 LEVELS

SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENCE RETURNS TO 1991 LEVELS

Taras Kuzio

Two recent Ukrainian

opinion polls have indicated both positive trends in Ukraine's

post-Soviet transition and an alarming degree of schizophrenia in

Ukraine's identity. A late-December poll by the Kyiv International Institute for Sociology (KMIS), based at the Kyiv Mohyla Academy, provided evidence that Ukraine had recovered from its postindependence depression. The KMIS poll found that support for state independence had returned to the same high levels that existed in the December 1991 referendum, in which 90.3 percent of those participating in the referendum – 84.3 percent of the electorate took part – supported independence from the Soviet Union, which translates into 76.1 percent of Ukrainian voters. The KMIS poll found that 77 percent of Ukrainians now support independence.

A number of factors have led to this return to high levels of support for independence. The KMIS poll was conducted two years after the economic recovery of Ukraine, which saw the country's first economic growth since 1989. In addition, the hardcore 20 percent opposed to independence found in the KMIS poll are likely to be supporters of the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) (in the March 2002 parliamentary elections, the KPU obtained 19.98 percent of the vote under a proportional party-list system). The March elections and subsequent opinion polls have showed that the popularity of the KPU is in decline. Its current parliamentary strength is less than half of what it had been in the 1998-2002 Verkhovna Rada.

The KPU is no longer seen as the sole opposition party to the executive and oligarchs. When it was the only opposition party, it

received the protest vote from noncommunist voters unhappy with their socioeconomic situation. In last year's elections, three other opposition forces appeared: Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine, the Socialists, and the Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc. Yushchenko said in an interview in "Dzerkalo tyzhnya" of 21-27 December that "our political force is oppositional."

The KPU suffers from being associated with the Soviet past, to which Ukrainians have a schizophrenic attitude. The KPU's continuing popularity of 20 percent is countered by a higher proportion of Ukrainians who hold negative views about communism. This negative attitude was capitalized upon by Leonid Kuchma in the second round of the 1999 presidential elections, which showed how it would be impossible for a Communist to win the presidency in Ukraine.

The impact of the growth of historical consciousness concerning crimes committed in the Soviet era, such as the 1933 famine, to which a large monument will be unveiled this year in Kyiv (a small one has existed since 1993), has reduced KPU support. Ukrainian leaders tirelessly repeat that independence will ensure that tragedies such as the 1933 famine and the April 1986 Chornobyl nuclear accident will be not repeated.

At the same time, Ukrainians remain divided over the Soviet legacy. The KMIS poll found that 38.6 percent agreed with the view that Josef Stalin was a "great leader" (vozhd). Stalin is associated

both with crimes against Ukrainians (such as the famine) and with victory in the Great Patriotic War (World War II).

Another poll this month by the Ukrainian Democratic Circle (UDK) found that 40 percent of Ukrainians -- twice the number of those supporting the KPU -- identified with the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, 47.7 percent identified themselves with Ukraine, a figure far lower than public support for independence.

The UDK poll also found that one-third of Ukrainians remained positive about the Soviet legacy, 42.2 percent held a positive attitude toward the Bolshevik Revolution, and 44.5 percent held negative views of this same event. During the 1990s, nationalist, anti-Bolshevik governments of the 1917-1921 era were rehabilitated in Ukraine, which may have affected attitudes regarding the Bolshevik Revolution. The UDK poll found that the doyen of Ukrainian historiography and president of the 1917-1918 Tsentralna Rada, Mykhaylo Hrushevskyy, was the third-most-positive historical figure for Ukrainians. Between the 1930s and the 1980s, Hrushevskyy, who worked in Soviet Ukraine during the 1920s, was attacked as a "bourgeois nationalist" and "German agent."

Ukrainians hold contradictory views of the Soviet era: nostalgic for the days of near-complete employment and cheap prices, when wages and pensions were paid on time, coupled with negative views of the crimes committed by the Soviet regime. Hence, not all of

the 58.7 percent who lamented the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the UDK poll are KPU voters.

The year 2002 also witnessed the revival of the popularity of national democrats to the same levels they held in the December 1991 presidential elections when five national democratic candidates obtained a combined vote of 34.2 percent. In the March 2002 elections, national democrats obtained a combined total of 30.77 percent (Our Ukraine received 23.56 percent and the Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc 7.21 percent). This revival of national democratic fortunes has also been seen in polls during the last two years, which have given Yushchenko stable ratings of 25-30 percent.

These different factors are closely interlinked. While Ukrainian statehood was still perceived to be threatened during the presidency of Leonid Kravchuk and during Kuchma's first term (1991-1999), the national democrats and former oligarchs held a mutual alliance against domestic (Communist) and foreign (Russian) threats.

As Ukrainian statehood became de facto and de jure no longer questioned in Kuchma's second term, the major focus of attention of different political groups switched to the issue of what kind of Ukraine was being built. On this question, the national democrats parted company with the centrist oligarchs and Kuchma, feeling they had more in common with the left. The Socialists had themselves

evolved toward a pro-statehood position during Kravchuk's tenure and Kuchma's first term. Meanwhile, the threat once represented by the Communists in Kuchma's first term was replaced by the authoritarianism and corruption of the centrist oligarchs in Kuchma's second.

The 1991, 1994, and 1999 presidential elections were dominated by issues of Ukrainian statehood. This will no longer be the case. The main issue that will be fought over in the presidential elections next year will be the nature of the system to be built in Ukraine.

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