

## SHCHERBYTSKY ANNIVERSARY SHOWS TRUE COLORS OF CENTRIST ELITE

The celebration of the anniversary of long-time Communist Party leader Volodymyr Shcherbytsky just a week after the Rada discussed the 1933 famine shows just how confused the country's elite are in their view of the Soviet past, Taras Kuzio writes.

[http://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/oped/14295/Shcherbytsky anniversary shows true colors of centrist elite](http://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/oped/14295/Shcherbytsky%20anniversary%20shows%20true%20colors%20of%20centrist%20elite)

By Taras Kuzio,

Feb 27, 2003 Kyiv Post

The contradictory views of Ukraine's political elite toward the country's Soviet past were highlighted by reactions to two anniversaries this month.

In early February, the parliament held long-overdue hearings on the 1933 artificial famine, which claimed between 3 million and 7 million lives in Ukraine. The following week, however, there was a radical change in emphasis. For the first time, independent Ukraine celebrated the anniversary of the birth of Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, leader of Ukraine's Communist Party for 17 years from 1972 until 1989. Under Shcherbytsky the party consistently denied the famine had ever occurred.

Deputy Prime Minister for the humanities Dmytro Tabachnyk signed a government resolution last month to celebrate Shcherbytsky's 85th anniversary with the erection of a monument in Kyiv. The Shcherbytsky anniversary was also marked with the publication of a volume of his collected articles, and the appearance in *Uryadovy Kurier* (Government Courier) of a laudatory article about him by Valentyna Shevchenko, the last

head of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet before semi-free parliament elections were held in March 1990.

These two anniversaries and the attitudes of different political forces toward them tell much about where Ukraine is heading. They clearly demonstrate that voters will face a clear-cut three-way choice in next year's presidential elections between a return to Soviet times (offered by the Communists), a freezing of the status quo in favour of a hybrid neo-Soviet system (offered by pro-presidential centrists) or moving forward together with Central-Eastern Europe to a Western-style system.

During the Rada hearings, the Communist Party maintained the same line it has followed since 1990 refusing to accept that the famine was a deliberate policy unleashed by Josef Stalin against Ukraine. National democrats predictably said the opposite and condemned the famine and the Soviet regime in total. Given the vision offered by the Communists to voters, it is not surprising that opinion polls continue to show that a majority of Ukrainians have negative views of Communism and that the party's support base is confined to a shrinking number of old age pensioners.

The centrists agree with the national democrats that the famine was genocide directed against Ukrainians. However, unlike the national democrats, who directly blame Russian policy towards Ukraine for the famine, they are more circumspect and prefer to put the blame on Stalinism and the Soviet regime. Their caution is not surprising as they themselves were members of the very same Communist Party in 1990 as current Communist Party leader Pyotr Symonenko. It has taken Ukraine's ex-national communists and now centrists 13 years to grudgingly move forward and deal with Soviet crimes against Ukrainians, such as the famine. It was only in 1999 that an annual Day of Understanding and Reconciliation was established by decree, and even then not on the Nov. 7 anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution as originally

envisaged. It was not until the following year that Communist Party symbols were finally removed from the external facade of the Rada.

The famine certainly murdered millions and so, it is difficult to ignore its 70th anniversary, even though it inconveniently falls in the same year as “The Year of Russia in Ukraine.” But why is Ukraine celebrating Shcherbytsky’s birthday now? After all, it did not celebrate the 75th anniversary in 1993 or the 80th in 1998. Is the 85th anniversary really that important? And why choose to commemorate Shcherbytsky rather than his predecessor, Petro Shelest. Shelest, who was removed in 1971 by Moscow and accused of “national deviationism” (i.e. the Communist Party’s euphemism for “nationalism”), more closely resembled the Ukrainian national communists of the 1920s, many of whom sacrificed their lives resisting Stalin.

There are two likely reasons why the Ukrainian elite wants to celebrate Shcherbytsky now.

Firstly, born in 1934 and 1938 respectively, Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma both experienced the greatest expansion of, and success in, their careers under Shcherbytsky. Kravchuk, a native of Rivne Oblast, became first secretary of the Communist Party in charge of ideology in 1980 at a time when West Ukrainians were rarely promoted to such high positions. Kuchma rose to prominence in the world’s largest nuclear weapons manufacturer, the Pivdenmash (Yuzhmash) plant in Dnipropetrovsk, where he became director in 1986.

Kravchuk openly stated his views about Shcherbytsky’s positive legacy in a collection of interviews published in Kyiv in 1994. At that time, his views on Shcherbytsky did not draw much attention. The Ukrainian diaspora still hailed him as an advocate of Ukrainian statehood, and a museum of Ukrainian folk arts was even named after him in the Toronto suburb of Mississauga,

which includes a large Ukrainian community.

The second reason for the Shcherbytsky celebration is that, after 12 years of Ukrainian independence, today's centrists feel they have consolidated their power to such a degree in the executive, government and Rada that they can openly express their nostalgia for the "good old days" under Shcherbytsky. The same three clans - Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk and Kyiv - are ruling Ukraine as they did in the Shcherbytsky era. And, just as then, Western Ukraine is marginalized.

There are three major problems with celebrating the Shcherbytsky anniversary. Firstly, his era was marked by repression, albeit on a smaller scale than in the 1930s. Shcherbytsky presided over what became known as the "Great Pogrom" in 1972 when hundreds of people were either arrested and sent to the Gulag or dismissed from their jobs. Some, like the poet-dissident Vasyl Stus whose state-assigned defense lawyer was current Presidential Administration head Viktor Medvechuk, died in the Gulag. By the early 1980s Ukrainians were proportionately the largest ethnic group among political prisoners in the Gulag. The situation became so desperate in the first half of the 1980s that nationalist anti-Soviet violence recurred in Western Ukraine, after a hiatus of three decades.

Many of the former Soviet dissidents who were arrested during the Shcherbytsky era are today in the ranks of the liberal and national democratic opposition Our Ukraine and Yulia Tymohenko Bloc. However, even Vladimir Malynkovich, a former political prisoner but by no means a fan of the national democrats, also dismissed the Shcherbytsky celebration as a "nomenklatura anniversary."

Secondly, Shcherbytsky (and Kravchuk) also bear guilt for not cancelling the May Day parade in 1986 only five days after the Chornobyl nuclear accident

on April 26. Much of the blame for the disastrous health effects of the radiation and its long-term aftermath on Ukraine's and Belarus's population can be laid at the feet of the Shcherbytsky regime and Moscow.

Thirdly, Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost policies after 1986 were his attempt at dealing with the aftermath of the "era of stagnation" presided over by the "Dnipropetrovsk Mafia" that included Leonid Brezhnev and Shcherbytsky. Is Tabachnyk really telling Ukrainians that they should look to the "era of stagnation," with its corruption, nepotism, Russification and cultural nihilism, as examples today's Ukraine should henceforth emulate?

It is obvious that the Ukrainian authorities either do not understand or do not care what signal celebrating Shcherbytsky sends to Western governments and international institutions and how it further adds to the existing skepticism about Ukraine's rhetoric of "returning to Europe." Since when has Shcherbytsky's "era of stagnation" been compatible with the European values toward which Ukraine's leaders theoretically profess to aspire?

The celebration of the Shcherbytsky anniversary is probably going to be the final nail in the coffin for the alliance between national democrats and national communists (today's centrists) that jointly defended Ukrainian statehood in the 1990s when it was deemed to be under threat from domestic and external threats. The liberal and national democratic opposition have now been given a wonderful opportunity to present an alternative vision for Ukraine to that of the neo-Soviet republic that pro-presidential centrists are nostalgically re-building. Henceforth, the liberal and national democratic opposition will now be able to promote itself once again as an alternative to Ukraine's two "eras of stagnation," under Brezhnev-Shcherbytsky in the 1970s and 1980s and under Kravchuk-Kuchma in the 1990s.

Dr. Taras Kuzio is a resident fellow of the Center for Russian and East European Studies, University of Toronto. His most recent book “Dilemmas of State-Led Nation Building in Ukraine” jointly edited with Paul D’Anieri was published in December.