

UKRAINE CELEBRATES ITS LAST INDEPENDENCE DAY UNDER KUCHMA

By [Taras Kuzio](#)

Ukraine celebrated the 13th anniversary of its independence from the USSR on August 24. The occasion is now regularly marked by a Soviet-style military parade and lengthy speeches elaborating national "accomplishments." Kyiv was draped with Soviet-style posters and billboards quoting President Leonid Kuchma and famous writers. New this year were color posters of smiling children with the caption, "I was born in independent Ukraine." The celebrations ended with a rock concert on Independence Square ("October Square" in Soviet days) in front of tens of thousands of young people.

Another independence day tradition is observed by Ukrainian newspapers, which publish opinion polls about how Ukrainians view independence. The Den (August 21) newspaper, edited by the wife of Defense Minister Yevhen Marchuk, asked Ukrainians if they agreed with the pointed question: "Even though on the path of statehood there are a lot of obstacles, I nevertheless still believe Ukraine should be independent." The paper reported that 66% replied positively and only 11% said "No."

A more representative poll conducted by the Razumkov Center think tank asked how respondents would vote if a referendum on independence would be held today. The results indicated that 53% would vote positively, while 28% answered that they would oppose independence. These figures are an improvement over 2002-2003 when only 47% responded positively and 34% were negative (Zerkalo Nedeli, August 21-27).

Two factors are behind this growing support for independence. First, the socio-economic situation has improved since 2000, and Ukraine now has the fastest growing GDP in Europe. Second, the main party opposed to Ukrainian statehood, the Communists (KPU), is in terminal decline. The size of the KPU parliamentary faction has declined from 120 (1994-1998), to 80 (1998-2002) to now only 55. Opinion polls conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology show that the KPU presidential candidate, Petro Symonenko, has dwindling support, polling an average of 8%.

The Razumkov poll also brought out the paradoxes that lie behind their results. Although only 53% would vote "Yes" in a referendum on independence, at the same time 77% believe that Ukraine's independence should be strengthened.

Ukrainian citizens seemingly respect independence, but they also feel estranged from the Ukrainian government. The gulf between the average citizen and the ruling elites has grown even wider since the Soviet era. Some 82% of Ukrainians do not believe they have any influence on society, while only 6% believe that state officials defend the rights of citizens.

Trust in state institutions is at an all time low. This is seen in public views of this year's elections, where most Ukrainians believe challenger Viktor Yushchenko will win, but Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich will be declared president (a switch successfully

accomplished in the April mayoral elections in Mukachiv). Ukrainians are again quoting Josef Stalin's comment, "It's not who wins that's important, but who counts the votes."

Despite the widely proclaimed economic growth, Ukrainians are primarily troubled by low wages and pensions, inflation, unemployment, high levels of corruption, and scarce medical care. About 77% of Ukrainians believe there is a need for a radical change of Ukraine's course.

Although attempts at constitutional changes have dominated Ukrainian politics for the last year, only 3% of Ukrainians care about this issue. Some 29% of Ukrainians agree with Yushchenko's view that a dictatorship is being built in Ukraine.

The gulf dividing the ruling elites and citizens is not the only noticeable one in Ukraine. Another more explosive chasm, as reflected in the intensity of the presidential election campaign, is that separating Kuchma and his oligarchic allies from the opposition. Although both reside in Ukraine, Kuchma and the opposition live in different worlds. In an August 24 Wall Street Journal editorial, Yushchenko lambasted the authorities for the millions of Ukrainians who live in poverty, corruption institutions "from education to medicine to government," the persecution of independent media outlets, and the lack of protection from law enforcement or the courts. Yushchenko described the Interior Ministry's surveillance of him and his family during the election campaign as a "feature of totalitarianism."

President Kuchma, however, maintains a completely different view of Ukraine. In his traditionally lengthy independence day speech, given to invited dignitaries on August 23, Kuchma lauded a decade of "accomplishments" under his leadership (www.president.gov.ua). Kuchma blamed Ukraine's Soviet legacy and the opposition for Ukraine's current problems. "The majority of those at the bottom did not believe, while the majority of those at the top did not know how to run [independent] Ukraine," Kuchma admitted.

The president was visibly irritated by the opposition's rallying cry of "Ukraine without Kuchma!" retorting that, "Ukraine would never be without Kuchma." He is even more irritated that what he views as his many "accomplishments" are not recognized because, "Some pygmies in [Ukrainian] politics are attempting to attain power under the slogan "Ukraine without Kuchma" (www.president.gov.ua Ukrayinska pravda, August 24).

The most contentious parts of his speech lay in Kuchma's criticism of Western calls for free elections and Western criticism over the lack of democratization. Like both Russian presidents Yeltsin and Putin, Kuchma complained that the West was forcing its own political system on Ukraine. Paradoxically, however, Kuchma has declared that he wants Ukraine to join the EU and NATO, without accepting the concurrent need for Ukraine to adopt a Western political-economic system. Russia precisely does not seek to join the EU or NATO because Moscow believes that Russia should forge its own unique path of development. It is difficult to believe, as Kuchma said in his address, "Europeanization

has become for us our national idea" (www.president.gov.ua).

Kuchma also interfered in the election campaign by stating confidently that his political course would continue over the next decade. As Yushchenko is calling for a change in Ukraine's direction, Kuchma's program could only be continued if Prime Minister Yanukovich succeeds him as Ukraine's next president. Kuchma, nevertheless, remains convinced that the election outcome will be decided by the "will of the Ukrainian people."