

**Category: OPINION**

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## **Autonomist sentiment stirring in western Ukraine**

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The political, economic and cultural stagnation of the second half of Leonid Kuchma's second term is fueling growing regional tension. Whereas in the past, such movements have been mainly associated with Donbas and Crimea, now discontent is rising in Galicia and more broadly western Ukraine. That these issues are being widely discussed in influential and respected Ukrainian publications suggests that they should be taken seriously, and not just dismissed as the ravings of a small group of crackpots.

In general, demands for federalism, autonomy and separation are protectionist measures against an actual or perceived threat from elsewhere. This is true of western Ukraine, which has always been the heartland of the Ukrainian national consciousness, and was the region that produced the most dissidents during the Soviet era and propelled Ukraine to independence in 1989 1991.

Historically, Ukraine has a tradition of supporting autonomist and federalist projects. Mykhailo Drahomaniv, the late 19th century political theorist, was a supporter of federalism. Mykhailo Hrushevsky, the doyen of Ukrainian historiography and (unelected) president of the Central Rada of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) in 1917 1918, advocated a German style federal arrangement of "lands" (lander). When the West Ukrainian People's Republic (ZUNR) united with the UNR in January 1919, it did so on the basis of an agreement that it would be accorded autonomy.

Autonomist sentiment resurfaced in Galicia in March 1990 after republican and local elections had removed the Communist Party from power in all three Galician oblasts – Lviv, Ivano Frankivsk and Ternopil. The then leader of Rukh, Vyacheslav Chornovil, who was elected chairman of Lviv Oblast Council, wanted to create a mechanism to safeguard the democratic victory in Galicia from the remainder of Communist ruled Ukraine. He proposed a Galician Assembly, which would promote the transformation of Ukraine along federal lines, the ultimate goal of which was to convert 24 oblasts into 10 or more "lands."

Elites sideline westerners

With the sudden arrival of independence in January 1992, Rukh dropped its backing for federalism and the Galician Assembly was discarded. President Leonid Kravchuk was not a supporter of federalism, which he feared would lead inevitably to Ukraine's disintegration. The only exception Kravchuk made was Crimea, which was allowed to change from an oblast to an autonomous republic after a local referendum in January 1991. Speaking at a conference at the University of Birmingham in 1996, Kravchuk said that he had little choice in the matter. If Kyiv failed to grant autonomy, the Crimeans were threatening to appeal to the USSR's Supreme Soviet to annul the 1954 decision transferring Crimea from Russia to Ukraine. This meant that Ukraine would have become independent without Crimea.

Autonomist and federalist sentiment raised their heads again in Donbas and Crimea in 1993 1995.

In Crimea in the early 1990s, autonomist sentiment grew into a full blown separatist movement. Yury Meshkov, the head of the Russia Bloc, was elected as Crimean president in January 1994. This

separatist movement proved short lived, however, collapsing in early 1995 when President Kuchma abolished the institution of the Crimean president. The separatist Russia Bloc could not compete against the pro autonomist "party of power" (the Party of Economic Revival of Crimea, and later the People's Democrats) or the far larger Crimean Communists, who supported autonomy within Ukraine, in the belief that it would ultimately return to a revived USSR.

In Donbas, the autonomist movement was at the time said to reflect resistance to the "Ukrainianization" policies Kravchuk was promoting in alliance with the national democrats. However, the real reasons were different. The eastern elites from Dnipropetrovsk and Donbas, who had run Ukraine during the Soviet era, felt excluded from what they saw as their rightful share of the benefits of running the country.

Since eastern Ukraine had remained largely passive in the drive for independence, Kravchuk was forced to rely on the Kyiv elites and his national democratic allies. This kind of alliance was not unique to Ukraine. Regional elites that had ruled Soviet republics were also replaced in the three Baltic states, Moldova, Tajikistan (where it led to a civil war between the north and south) and elsewhere.

Eastern Ukraine wanted to return to being "top dog" in independent Ukraine, and the general economic collapse and hyper inflation of 1993 allowed the eastern Ukrainian elites to mobilize disgruntled coal miners against Kravchuk. President Kravchuk was forced to replace the incompetent Prime Minister Leonid Kuchma with Yufym Zvyahilsky, a coal boss and former mayor of Donetsk.

The election of Kuchma as president in July 1994 marked a return to the Soviet era domination of the "Dnipropetrovsk mafia." Western Ukraine has been sidelined ever since. Ukraine's

stagnation today is therefore reminiscent of the "era of stagnation" under Leonid Brezhnev.

### Galician resentment grows

Ukraine's "era of stagnation" has produced a new movement for federalism and autonomy in Galicia, where it was originally propagated in 1990. Taras Wozniak, editor of the journal "Ji" (I) and head of foreign affairs for the Lviv city council, has championed the ideas of Galician autonomy and a federal territorial administrative structure for Ukraine [see "Ukraine should consider federalism," Kyiv Post, May 23]. His ideas have been supported by the local newspaper Postup, which has its origins in the samizdat Post Postup newsletter published in the late Soviet era by the Tovarystvo Lev NGO. Other writers published articles supporting Wozniak's proposals in a recent issue of the well known literary political monthly Suchasnist, and at various times in the Internet based Ukrainska Pravda and the daily newspaper Den.

The reason for the popularity of these ideas should be clear. Galicia and western Ukraine have felt excluded from running the country since Kuchma returned Ukraine to rule in the Soviet tradition after 1994. Western Ukraine is in a severe socio economic crisis and survives largely thanks to funds sent home by locals working abroad, often illegally, or from shuttle trade with Poland and other central European countries. During the Kuchmagate crisis in early 2001, most of the demonstrators were from west Ukraine and Kyiv. Now the region feels cheated by Kuchma's unwillingness to accept the victory in the March parliament elections of Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine bloc, which swept western and central Ukraine. The executive's antics in forcing Volodymyr Lytvyn into the position of Rada speaker, and its refusal to replace Prime Minister Anatoly Kinakh after the bloc he supported (For a United Ukraine) received

only 12 percent of the vote are all contributing to a sense of Ukraine's new "era of stagnation." The air show disaster in Lviv on July 27 is also bound to increase anti Kuchma feeling in the region.

Galicia and western Ukraine also feel threatened by what they see as the Kyiv authorities' "Little Russian" cultural policies, which continue Soviet era Russification. The view of the "Dnipropetrovsk mafia" that Ukraine should "re join Europe together with Russia" is also disconcerting to western Ukrainians. They understand very well that this means Ukraine will never "re join Europe" since Russia has never expressed a desire to join either the EU or NATO.

While it seems unlikely at the moment that Galicia will ever campaign for outright separatism, the threat clearly exists. A recent article in the Polish magazine *Polityka* reprinted on the *Ukrainska Pravda* Web site claimed that slogans have appeared on walls in Lviv calling for "Nezaleznist Halycyny!" (Independence for Galicia) written in Latin letters to emphasize the point. A local poll also found that 40 per cent of Galicians would support their region's separation if Kyiv decided to ever join the Russian Belarusian union.

In the next two years Ukraine's territorial integrity will be severely tested by three events. First, the negative psychological effect of the introduction of visas by Poland in July 2003 will be greater in western Ukraine than in other regions. Second, the enlargement of NATO and the EU in 2002 2004 will bypass Ukraine, intensifying the feeling of being shut out of "Europe." Third, regional disgruntlement in western Ukraine will grow if the 2004 presidential elections lead to the victory of Kuchma's chosen successor.

One can only imagine the stagnation awaiting Ukraine during another two terms under a ruler cast in Kuchma's mould. Ukraine would probably have to change its foreign policy from "returning to Europe" to "returning to Eurasia." But in that case, it might have to do so without Galicia.

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