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Image makeover is misconceived

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A few months ago, I reluctantly responded to a questionnaire sent out to various "international experts" in an effort to establish what they thought about Ukraine. The survey was commissioned by Ukraine Cognita, a non government organization set up last year to improve the country's international image. The published findings were not surprising: the majority of respondents believe that Ukraine is a corrupt, unreliable and unstable country that is run by mafia, where human rights are routinely infringed, and where opposition politicians and journalists often end up dead. I could easily have told Ukraine Cognita all that beforehand and saved them the large sum they clearly spent on the exercise.

Ukraine has long been feeling the ill effects of this image problem. It has certainly contributed to the European Union's reluctance to accept it as a candidate for membership and to its poor record in attracting foreign investment. Until recently, however, the Ukrainian government did not seem to be much worried about the situation, and it did little to support public relations.

It was probably no coincidence that Ukraine Cognita was launched last June shortly after the country's already poor international image took a further dive as a result of the "Kuchmagate" scandal. The organization is co chaired by State Tax Administration head Mykola Azarov and Deputy Prime Minister for the Humanities Volodymyr

Semynozhenko. It is easy to be pessimistic about Ukraine Cognita's mission, given that some of those behind it have contributed substantially to Ukraine's poor international reputation in the first place.

It is hard to believe that the country's rulers are genuinely puzzled why it has such a bad image. They can hardly be unaware that they have presided over a country whose economy has declined more than that of any other post communist state that has not undergone a war, whose population has decreased by more than 3 million since independence, and which has the highest level of AIDS infection in Eastern Europe. Corruption is condoned in return for political loyalty; democratization has declined each year since 1998 (according to Freedom House's Nations in Transit survey for 2002); Soviet assets have been pillaged; arms have been exported to numerous dubious regimes; and the serious allegations against Ukraine's leaders that surfaced during "Kuchmagate" continue to be officially ignored. Yet more damage has been done by the attempts to change the March election results through threats and bribery in parliament in order to validate the absurd claim that pro presidential blocs won the elections.

BLAME THE MESSENGERS

Ukraine Cognita and its backers in Ukraine's ruling elites cannot seem to believe that these and other negative aspects of Ukraine's post Soviet transition are the real cause of Ukraine's poor image abroad. Instead, they insist that it all comes down to

misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Instead of looking at the real causes of Ukraine's image problem, they tend always to blame others. "Kuchmagate" was the result not of malpractice by the ruling elites, but of a Western plot (allegedly concocted by followers of Zbigniew Brzezinski). Western reports about Ukrainian arms exports to UN embargoed countries or those ravaged by civil wars are not truthful; they are really part of a plot to undermine the country's arms export potential.

Ukraina Cognita sees its task in countering all this misinformation. Iryna Gagarina, executive director of Ukraine Cognita, believes with apparent sincerity that Ukraine's negative image is the result of a disproportionate amount of "twisted" negative news reaching the West. Former President Leonid Kravchuk told the second congress of Ukraine Cognita in July that official bodies should ensure that "objective information" about Ukraine is presented in the media and on the Internet.

Actually, there is some truth to these claims - there are problems with the way Ukraine is reported in the Western media. Part of the problem is internal to Ukraine. The country inherited very few individuals with experience in dealing with the outside world. Indeed, the majority of the Soviet experts in diplomacy and international affairs - who were all based in Moscow anyway - transferred their allegiance to Russia after the USSR disintegrated in 1991. The press attaches and other individuals who are responsible for contact with the media at Ukrainian embassies abroad tend to be among the weakest personnel.

For its part, the Western media devotes very limited coverage to Ukraine, considering its size. Ukraine still has virtually no full time, salaried foreign correspondents from any Western country. Many of the Western journalists who travelled to Kyiv in the late 1980s and early 1990s to work as stringers were from local newspapers, and they saw the experience as a way of climbing the ladder to more prestigious foreign postings. Stringers are only paid for what they publish. This leads to a tendency to sensationalize as a way of getting material published. Stringers are inevitably not paid very much, and this leaves them vulnerable to "offers." The number of newspaper correspondents based in Ukraine has progressively declined since then.

The majority of reporting on Ukraine for Western media is, in fact, done by Moscow based correspondents who periodically descend on Ukraine to write often biased and Russo centric articles. As was the case in the Soviet Union, Moscow based correspondents attempt to cover all 15 republics. When The Economist sent its correspondent to Ukraine before the elections, the trip resulted in a single article (Feb. 7) that stated that Yulia Tymoshenko "is floundering" and predicted that the next parliament was likely to be "even more pliant than the present one."

DOMESTIC, RUSSIAN MEDIA

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian authorities don't seem to care that the Russian media still predominate in Ukraine. The Inter channel, which is the leading TV channel in eastern and southern Ukraine,

takes much of its news programs directly from Russia's ORT. As a leading member of the SDPU(u), which controls Inter, Kravchuk was being inconsistent when he complained at the recent Ukraine Cognita congress that 90 percent of Internet users learn about Ukraine from Russian sites. The continuing Russian influence denies Ukrainian citizens access to a "Ukrainian viewpoint" on domestic and international events. This is especially important during elections when Russia backs one candidate or bloc, and during international crises such as the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999.

Many of the newspapers with highest circulation in Ukraine are reprinted Russian ones (e.g. *Izvestiya na Ukraini*, *Argumenty i Fakty na Ukraini*). Over 80 percent of the books sold in Ukraine are from Russia. If this never seems to have bothered Ukraine's leaders, it is probably because, as Michael Naydan wrote in the *Kyiv Post* ["Ukrainian literature needs promotion," July 25], the authorities have no interest in Ukrainian culture.

Ukraine's negative international image far outweighs the small number of important achievements it can boast, such as the lack of ethnic conflict. But even these are enough for it to earn occasional favorable comparisons to other CIS states. However, if Ukraine really desires to "re join Europe," it has to stop comparing itself to countries such as Turkmenistan and instead look to the progress made by other former laggards in reform in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Slovakia and even Serbia.

So long as the gap between Ukraine/CIS and the Baltics/Central Eastern Europe continues to grow, Ukraine Cognita's efforts to improve Ukraine's international image will be futile. And it will only be possible to close the gap if neo Soviet leaders are replaced by those capable of replacing empty rhetoric with structural reforms in the political regime.

Ultimately, if Ukraine's elites and Ukraine Cognita really want to improve their country's image, they could always start by respecting Ukraine and its citizens. Until they do so, why should the outside world?

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