



Taras Kuzio

## **Russian, Soviet nationalism is the biggest threat to democracy, ethnic stability in Ukraine**

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Nationalism in Ukraine is traditionally understood as western Ukrainian and ethnic by Western scholars such as Germany's Andreas Umland who have focused their research on Svoboda and western Ukrainian nationalists. Unfortunately, this analysis does not do justice to a complicated country such as Ukraine, where anti-democratic culture, racial intolerance, anti-Semitism and xenophobia are more prevalent in eastern and southern Ukraine and the Crimea.

The prevalence of bi-ethnic identities and high levels of Russian language use in eastern and southern Ukraine translates into high levels of identification with Soviet and Russian culture and deep levels of hostility towards Ukrainian nationalism. This, in turn, provides a bedrock of support for Sovietophile and Russophile parties, such as the Communist Party and the ruling pro-presidential Party of Regions because public support for social authoritarian political forces is far higher in eastern than western Ukraine. The Communist Party and Party of Regions have eight times as much support in eastern and southern Ukraine and the Crimea, at 40 percent nationwide, compared to 4-5 percent nationwide for the Svoboda nationalist party. Western Ukrainian ethnic nationalism has been weak in Ukraine and support for Svoboda, even in the face of Yanukovich's Russophile nationality policies and democratic regression, has remained comparably low compared to that for nationalist groups in post-communist Europe.

The Party of Regions, when it has been in opposition and since the 2010 elections when it has had control of parliament and the presidency, has been by far the most aggressive and violent political force in Ukraine. This is evident from violence it has undertaken inside and outside parliament against opposition parliamentary deputies and journalists and its campaign of political repression against Yulia Tymoshenko and her supporters.

On Dec. 16, 2010, Party of Regions deputies violently attacked opposition deputies sleeping overnight in parliament who were protesting against political repression. Stephan Shulman, drawing on his surveys, concluded that ethnic Ukrainian nationalism provided higher levels

of support for democracy than eastern Slavic identity which was more supportive of authoritarianism. Dominique Arel, chair of Ukrainian studies at the University of Ottawa in Canada, pointed out that the “political culture in eastern Ukraine is based on intimidation. [Ex-President Leonid] Kuchma in the late 1990s tried, and ultimately failed, to institute the ‘blackmail’ state. Yanukovich learned nothing from the [2004] Orange Revolution and everything from Vladimir Putin that to stay in power, you have to bully your opponents.”

Arel believes: “Western commentators have often been suspicious of its (Ukrainian nationalism’s) intent and possible consequences. Nationalism is the desire to have one’s state or to make an existing state ‘national’ (and what “national” means is generally quite contested). It can have its ugly side, and the rise of Svoboda in Galicia is not pretty.”

Arel continues:

“But let the record show that Ukrainian nationalism, in the empirically verifiable field of Ukrainian politics of the last 20 years, has been the driving force behind democracy, while Ukrainian anti-nationalism, for lack of a better word, a.k.a. the political forces grounded in eastern Ukraine, have aimed at the dismantlement of democracy. Rukh in the 1990s, Our Ukraine and the Tymoshenko Bloc in the 2000s had serious flaws (rule of law, historical memory), but they were, in their actions, not just in words, for free elections and a free media. Political culture in Central-Western Ukraine is rowdy, exasperating in its incomprehension of the law, but open.”

Russian nationalism in Ukraine has been far more of a threat to inter-ethnic peace and democracy in Ukraine. Agent’s provocateurs hired by the authorities provoked nationalist violence in March 2001 in Kyiv during anti-Kuchma protests. Russian nationalists were permitted to travel to Lviv in May 2011 to celebrate victory in the Great Patriotic War (World War II), ensuring violence would be inevitable between Russian and Ukrainian nationalists in which a Ukrainian nationalist was shot and wounded. Two Ukrainian activists were murdered by Russian nationalists and no Russian nationalist or activist has died at the hands of Ukrainian nationalists. On May 8, 2000, Ihor Bilozir, a composer, was murdered in Lviv and on April 17, 2009, Maksym Chaika, a 20-year-old student of Odesa National University and member of the patriotic youth movement Sich, was murdered in Odesa.

Russian and neo-Soviet nationalism remains influential and popular in the Crimea where neo-Soviet and Russian nationalist publications and groups fan anti-Tatar xenophobia and Ukrainophobia. Mykhailo Bakharev, editor of Krymskaya Pravda, has repeatedly said there is no Ukrainian language and that it is an “artificial language” of the uneducated part of population invented by bard Taras Shevchenko and others. Bakharev believes no Ukraine nation exists and that the Ukrainian State has no future. A higher number of monuments and placards dedicated to historical figures and national tragedies have been defaced and vandalized in eastern Ukraine and the Crimea than have Soviet monuments to World War II been defaced in western Ukraine. Antagonism to Ukrainian history and national identity draws on a Soviet legacy of “anti-nationalist” tirades against World War II Ukrainian nationalists, dissidents and Ukrainian emigres. Russian nationalist and arsonist Vladimir Pogruzhslysky was sentenced in 1964 for setting fire to the Soviet Ukrainian Academy of Sciences library that destroyed countless unique historical manuscripts.

Pro-Russian groups in the Crimea play on anti-Tatar sentiments and racial stereotypes that have nurtured the highest degree of xenophobia found in any Ukrainian region. The U.S. Embassy in Kyiv reported that Russian nationalists in the Crimea, “attempt to maintain a constant level of interethnic tension for political reasons.” The Party of Regions alliance with Russian nationalists in the Crimea since the 2006 elections (when they formed the joint “For Yanukovich!”) has stoked inter-ethnic conflict and exacerbated anti-Tatar xenophobia among Party of Regions leaders. An example of a xenophobic Party of Regions leader is former head of the Crimean Interior Ministry and Crimean Prime Minister Anatoliy Mogiliov. Crimean Tatars protested at Mogiliov’s appointment because of his reputation for ruthlessness in suppressing Tatar protests.

Mogiliov had written a xenophobic opinion commentary for Krymskaya Pravda supporting Stalinist ethnic cleansing of the Crimean Tatars after they were accused of being “Nazi collaborators.” Xenophobic views of Crimean Tatars views are common in the Crimea. Crimean Parliamentary Chairman Anatoliy Grytsenko told U.S. Ambassador William Taylor that Crimean Tatars “betrayed” the USSR in World War II and that, “a majority of Crimea’s inhabitants viewed Tatars as traitors.” Xenophobic views are regularly fanned by Krymskaya Pravda and other media outlets in the Crimea. On Inter, a television channel owned by oligarch and Minister of Finance Valeriy Khoroshkovsky, well-known Crimean lead anchor Yuri Pershykov has a long record of producing anti-Tatar xenophobic reports.

Ukrainian surveys have also shown higher levels of anti-semitism in eastern and southern Ukraine and the Crimea than in western Ukraine. The US State Departments 2011 report on human rights practices in Ukraine recorded anti-Semitic violence and vandalism in Kyiv, Pavlohrad, Sumy, Korovohrad, Dnipropetrovsk, Cherkassy, Melitopol, and Mykolayiv, in central, eastern and southern Ukraine and Sudak and Sevastopol in the Crimea. The Academy of Personnel Management (MAUP) private university produced a large volume of anti-Semitic materials but this has now ceased, according to the U.S. State Department report. U.S. Embassy cables reported anti-Semitic attacks, vandalism and inflammatory articles in local newspapers in Odesa. The U.S. State Department’s 2011 report on human rights practices in Ukraine reported on anti-semitic programs aired by the radio show Vik on Kherson National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council. Russian nationalist group ZUBR (For the Union of Ukraine Belarus and Russia) published anti-Semitic articles in its party newspaper ZaZUBRina. The one anti-Semitic incident in western Ukraine listed in the U.S. State Department’s 2011 report on human rights practices was against a Jewish cemetery in Ternopil.

The Mykola Melnychenko tapes show eastern Ukrainian Kuchma to have been an anti-Semite and xenophobe. The tapes include anti-Semitic curses and rants by Kuchma against his political and business supporters and adversaries. Kuchma, discussing Heorhiy Surkis and Kievskie Vedomosti newspaper with State Tax Administration head (and current Prime Minister) Mykola Azarov, says, “blya (fuck), why do we need a Jew, blya.” In another taped episode, Azarov asked Kuchma to approve an illegal scheme in which he could trade his 50-square meter apartment in Kyiv for one three times the size in a more desirable building. The scheme included the eviction of a Jewish family occupying the larger apartment. Playing on Kuchma’s anti-Semitism, Azarov said to him: “Well, there the Jews would have to be taken out ...” Kuchma gave his permission to throw the family out so that Azarov could have

the apartment. Kuchma and Azarov made anti-Semitic remarks when discussing the takeover of Sloviansky Bank owned by director Boris Feldman and in anti-Semitic slurs against other Jewish directors.

Objective studies of nationalism in Ukraine should not focus too much on western Ukraine and groups such as Svoboda. The Party of Regions is the greatest threat to democracy and most violent political force in Ukraine. There would be no Svoboda without the Party of Regions. Last year, two reports by the pro-Yanukovich American Institute in Ukraine condemned the Party of Regions financial support for Svoboda. The overwhelming majority of instances of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in Ukraine take place outside western Ukraine in regions where the Party of Regions holds a monopoly of power.

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