



Taras Kuzio

Russophile agenda rising once again

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Taras Kuzio writes: Shelest, Kuchma had more in common than Shcherbytsky, Yanukovych

President Viktor Yanukovych is no aberration in Ukrainian politics. Yanukovych draws on a Russophile and pro-Moscow centrist tradition indigenous to Ukraine. “Imperial communists” existed in this nation since the inception of the Communist Party of Ukraine.

The orientation became most acute under Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, who ruled the Soviet republic of Ukraine from 1972 to 1989. He was followed by “imperial communists” Volodymyr Ivashko and Stanislav Hurenko. Hurenko led the Communist Party after he retired in 1989-1991. Pyotr Symonenko, the Communist Party of Ukraine leader since 1993, is the continuation of this “imperial communist” tradition in Ukrainian politics. Ukraine’s “national communist” tradition also goes back to the beginnings of the Communist Party in Ukraine, but was annihilated in the early 1930s.

In the 1960s, it revived and became most closely associated with Petro Shelest, a native of Kharkiv who ran Soviet Ukraine from 1963 to 1972, and Kravchuk, a western Ukrainian who dominated this group between 1989 and 1994.

The Feb. 7 election of Yanukovych signals a decisive break in Ukraine’s history as it signifies the return of the “imperial communist” orientation to Ukrainian politics. Yanukovych is more pro-Russian than ex-President Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005) in domestic and foreign policies. Yanukovych is seeking to change the consensus of integration with the West that had been accepted by Ukraine’s first three presidents – Kravchuk (1991-1994), Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko (2005-2010).

Yanukovych, for example, is the first Ukrainian president to oppose NATO membership because he does not see Russia as a threat to Ukraine.

“Imperial communists” were destroyed in August 1991 when the Communist Party of Ukraine was banned.

However, the party was then legalized again in 1993 – constituting a threat to Ukrainian independence throughout the 1990s, as it supported a revived U.S.S.R.

The Communist Party of Ukraine went into decline after the 1999 and 2002 elections, when voters rejected Symonenko and the party. Its place was taken by the Party of Regions, established in 2001 in Donetsk. It has drawn many ex-Communist voters and evolved over the next decade into the dominant party of Russo-phone eastern-southern Ukraine. The Party of Regions and Communist Party of Ukraine have aligned on numerous occasions during this period.

They twice joined coalitions and governments, in 2006-2007, and again today. They gave a no-confidence vote in Ukraine's first truly reformist government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko from 1999-2001, and cooperated on constitutional changes in 2003-04. Communist Party voters twice backed Yanukovich in the second rounds of presidential elections, 2004 and 2010.

Kuchma had no problems in developing short-term tactical alliances with the Communist Party, such as in removing Yushchenko as prime minister in 2001 or adopting a new Constitution in 1996. But he pulled out all the stops to defeat Symonenko in the 1999 presidential elections and to reduce the party's influence in eastern-southern Ukraine.

Nationalism vs. imperialism

The post-Josef Stalin era in Ukraine was dominated by two different Communist Party leaders: Petro Shelest (1963-1971) and Vladimir Shcherbytsky (1972-1989). With Leonid Kravchuk and Viktor Yushchenko each only serving one term, independent Ukraine could be dominated by Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich.

Ukraine's two post-Stalin leaders are usually contrasted, with Shelest representing "national communism" and Shcherbytsky representing loyalty and servility to Moscow. In Soviet Ukraine, Moscow relied heavily for political control upon the Donetsk-Dnipropetrovsk Russified elite. These two clans dominated Soviet Ukraine and now independent Ukraine (Kuchma, Yanukovich).

Shelest sought to balance the promotion of the interests of Soviet Ukraine while showing his loyalty to Moscow. Shelest was, though, also facing an uphill battle against Soviet policies of Russification and de-nationalization promoted by "liberal" Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who ruled from 1953 to 1964, and "conservative" leader Leonid Brezhnev, who was in charge between 1964 and 1982.

Ivan Dzyuba's Internationalism or Russification? was written in 1965, but only first published in Ukraine in the late 1980s. Dzyuba's report called for a return to Vladimir Lenin's nationality policy, which allegedly never included Russification. This Euro-communist position sought to blame Stalinism rather than communism or Marxism-Leninism.

Shelest fails Moscow

Shelest's attempt to balance the demands of Kyiv and Moscow failed. He was removed by Moscow in 1972. His removal was followed by arrests of Ukrainian dissidents and purges of the cultural intelligentsia, the re-subordination of academic institutions to stricter Communist Party control and a campaign against Ukrainian national identity.

Shcherbytsky used the threat from Ukrainian nationalism and Shelest "nationalistic deviationism" as a means to consolidate his rule and prove his loyalty and servility to Moscow.

Shelest was neither a separatist nor an early Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader from 1985 until its collapse in 1991. Shelest resembled the Ukrainian Cossack Hetman leaders of the first half of the 18th century. They, like Shelest, sought to do the impossible by defending their territory while seeking to promote good relations with Moscow.

Kuchma came to power with a romantic notion that he would quickly “normalize” relations with Russia. Kuchma’s romanticism about Moscow was sobered by Russian President Boris Yeltsin’s three-year wait before flying into Kyiv to sign a treaty recognizing Ukraine’s borders. Kuchma evolved from being a Cossack Hetman and Communist Party leader like Shelest, to a leader of a country.

In the 1990s, Kuchma had the possibility to undertake this evolution because Ukraine was already independent, thanks largely to western Ukrainians (Kravchuk and the opposition), Russia was in post-imperial decline and U.S., NATO and International Monetary Fund support was forthcoming in exchange for Ukraine giving up nuclear weapons.

Although Shelest was never a nationalist, he lobbied for republican cultural and economic rights. Shelest did not oppose the more outspoken cultural intelligentsia, the first time raising its head in three decades since Stalin’s Great Terror, but neither did he endorse them. His speech to the 1966 Ukrainian Writers’ Congress was understood as giving support to the intelligentsia.

In August 1965, the minister of education circulated a plan for the Ukrainianization of higher education institutions. Current Minister of Education Dmytro Tabachnyk is more like Shcherbytsky in introducing steps to reduce the influence of the Ukrainian language.

Shelest proved to be more tolerant of dissent than his successor Shcherbytsky. A fearful Moscow punished Ukrainian dissidents more severely than Russian ones. The 1972-1973 arrests and purges coincided with his removal and the rise of a subservient loyalist group headed by Shcherbytsky.

Dzyuba’s manuscript, *Internationalism or Russification? A Study in the Soviet Nationalities Problem*, was presented to the Soviet Ukrainian leadership in 1965 and circulated among regional leaders. The reaction was largely negative, especially from Shcherbytsky’s supporters. Dzyuba was attacked in domestic publications and those geared for the Ukrainian diaspora. In March 1972, Dzyuba was expelled from the Writers Union of Ukraine, arrested the following month and sentenced in March 1973 to five years imprisonment. Dzyuba recanted his views and escaped imprisonment.

Four decades later, Dzyuba, in a long three-part article published in July in the Ukrainian newspaper *Den*, condemned the “anti-Ukrainian” education policies of Tabachnyk. Our Ukraine parliament deputy Yaroslav Kendzior said in July that the Yanukovich administration “hates the Ukrainian language and everything Ukrainian.” The same statement could apply to the Brezhnev-Shcherbytsky era.

The largest local branch of the Communist Party in Ukraine, in Donetsk, is ultra-loyal to Moscow. The party organization has always been headed by an ethnic Russian. Any post-communist force that emerges in independent Ukraine with its base in Donetsk would be, therefore, inevitably highly Russophile and desirous of close ties to Moscow.

Shcherbytsky's servility

The installation of Shcherbytsky as Communist Party leader represented the triumph of Moscow over the Soviet Ukrainian republic. Shcherbytsky’s task was to please Moscow. A similar task was set for Yanukovich by Moscow before and after his election. The “red lines” which Russia objected to in Ukraine were spelled out in the August 2009 scandalous open letter by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to then-president Yushchenko. The Russian and Ukrainian media revealed that Russia sought to influence the appointments of education minister and the “siloviki” power ministries of interior, foreign and defense.

A rollback of nation-building, long-term extension of the Russian Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol and an end to Ukraine’s drive to NATO membership were three important Russian demands that Yanukovich fulfilled.

Under Shcherbytsky, the elite were increasingly and disproportionately recruited from the more Russified

Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk party branches. They were ultra loyal to Moscow and more inclined to side with “imperial communists” during the tumultuous 1989-1991 period of Ukrainian politics.

Shelest, by contrast, was far less servile to Russia. Again, this is similar to the difference between Kuchma who -- although not anti-Russian -- was wary of Russia as a threat to Ukrainian sovereignty, and Yanukovich, who looks to Moscow with childlike awe.

The number of Ukrainian schoolchildren educated in Ukrainian-language schools decreased in the late 1970s and fewer books were published in the Ukrainian language under Brezhnev than under Stalin. Although two decades of Ukrainian independence reversed the downward trend in Ukrainian-language education, this progress abruptly stopped after Yanukovich’s election.

Shelest, like Ukraine’s first three presidents, had been willing to support the Ukrainian language, culture and historiography. Shcherbytsky, in contrast, chose to speak Russian, as do most government ministers in the Azarov government, including Azarov himself.

Shcherbytsky remained in power over 17 years and four Communist Party leaders because he proved loyal and useful to Moscow in its objective of maintaining control over the strategic Soviet Ukrainian republic.

The Shcherbytsky regime was founded on a “younger brother” logic that permitted total control by local elites of the republic in return for unswerving loyalty to the “elder Russian brother.” Again, we find a subtle difference between Kuchma, who was distrustful of Russia and sought equal relations, and Yanukovich, who has adopted a more subservient and unequal relationship.

The national and imperial communist traditions have always existed in Ukraine. With the election of Yanukovich, the imperial communist tradition in Ukraine is back in power for the first time in two decades. There is, indeed, more that links Shcherbytsky and Yanukovich than some may realize.

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