

Taras Kuzio

The president's Independence Day speech reveals what kind of Ukraine is being built

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I do not read every speech or decree by Ukrainian presidents but one that I have read every year since August 1992 is the speech made to commemorate the 24 August declaration of independence. I will always remember 24 August 1991 as on that Saturday afternoon I was meeting friends in Harrow, a suburb of London where I then lived.



This was a time when there were no mobile phones or internet and so my fiancée could not reach to tell me the news of what had happened in the Ukrainian parliament that day. When I returned home in late afternoon (which was nearly midnight in Kyiv) my fiancée told me Ukraine had declared independence. I rang my father who typically replied 'Its about time!' and the word soon spread around Britain's Ukrainian diaspora. BBC news kept repeating the vote in the Ukrainian parliament showing then Rukh member Serhiy Holovatyj jumping up and down (how times have changed, Holovatyj is a member of the Party of Regions since 2007). I spent the evening doing television and radio interviews in my capacity as director of the Ukrainian Press Agency (UPA).

Independence day speeches given by Ukraine's first three presidents, Leonid Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko, did not radically differ. They all focused on the national and state question because the speech aimed to place Ukraine's independence within the context of Ukraine's history as the culmination of 'the [thousand-year tradition of state development in Ukraine](#)', as the 24 August 1991 Declaration had stated.

The tone changed in Yanukovich's speech on the anniversary of the July 16, 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty where there was no mention of Kyiv Rus, the Cossack era, the Central Rada, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and Ukrainian dissidents and patriots in the U.S.S.R. Yanukovich instead focused only on the Soviet Ukrainian republic as the pre-cursor of Ukrainian statehood.

In other words, a similar model of national identity is being introduced as in Belarus where President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, like Yanukovich, sees the Soviet era as the most important era of his country's nation-building. It is not surprising therefore that Donetsk was often seen as 'Ukraine's Belarus'.

Western advocates of Yanukovich therefore mistakenly believe that Minister of Education Dmytro Tabachnyk is an aberration with the 'real' Party of Regions being pro-European and run by 'pragmatic' oligarchs. Nothing could be further from the truth. Tabachnyk is an integral component of the Party of Regions (and therefore the Yanukovich administrations) eastern Slavic, neo-Soviet identity and ideology.

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Nineteen independence day speeches by Ukraine's first three presidents differ completely from Yanukovich's speech on the Maidan this year. Like his speech a month before on the anniversary of the Declaration of Sovereignty there was not a word that appealed to the national question, to the '[thousand-year tradition of state development in Ukraine](#)'. Yanukovich is seemingly unaware of any Ukrainian history except Soviet Ukrainian history which is what he is most comfortable with.

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It is little wonder that new school textbooks that are introduced into Ukraine's schools this month give a more benevolent view of the Soviet period and edit out events where Ukraine fought against Russia for independence, events which appeared in textbooks published under Ukraine's first three presidents ([www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2010/08/26/5332444/](#) and interview ([www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2010/08/26/5333553/](#)).

Yanukovich's independence day speech was dry and read more like the traditional yearly statement read to parliament on conditions in the country. These included the 'evils' of the previous governments, the end of the 'era of populism', finishing with 'chaos' and returning to stability, renewed cooperation with the IMF, pursuit of economic reforms, etc. etc. Some of the speech was outright at odds with reality, such as the claim that the 'Democratic world is positively and with great interest accepting the processes taking place in Ukraine in recent times'. The five points laid out in the speech cover a strong president, a 'responsible and professional executive power', a 'competent' parliament, the economy, and judicial system.

But, not a single word on Ukraine's national history, the heroes who fought for Ukrainian independence, culture, language and the national idea. Nothing!

The only conclusion one can make from the presidents July and August speeches on two important state and national anniversaries is that the authorities are building their Ukraine by turning the clock back and seeking to reverse two decades of nation-building. This was easy for Lukashenka to do as ethnic Belarusian nation-building had only been in place for two years before he came to power and this has meant he has been able to successfully preserve a Soviet Belarusian national identity within an unreformed Soviet political-economic system.

But, Ukraine is surely different? Right?

As Viktor Mysan, a historian and author of Ukraine's school textbooks, said, 'everything that is researched, created, and written since 1991 cannot be re-written, burnt, drowned, and destroyed' (www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2010/08/26/5333553/). That is why I remain optimistic that the Donetsk, neo-Soviet nation-building project will fail to reverse the work of three Ukrainophile presidents undertaken over the last two decades.

Much of this though will depend on Ukraine's patriots and civil society, particularly young people, the 'generation orange'.

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