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Taras Kuzio.

Nation must break vicious cycle

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Taras Kuzio writes: Ukraine repeatedly swings between Russophile, nationalistic re-birth polices in last century.



Is it Ukraine's fate therefore to experience repeated cycles of national rebirth-democratization followed by conservative, Russophile counter-revolution? Let us hope not.

In the last 100 years, Ukraine has experienced three cycles of national re-birth and democratization followed on each occasion by conservative Russophile counter revolution.

Ukrainians were deluded into thinking that the cycle had run its course in 1991 when the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) was banned as the party had by then shrunk to a small coterie of "imperial communists" who supported the August 1991 putsch in Moscow.

But they were sadly mistaken.

Although only 5 percent of its Soviet era 3.5 million members re-joined the re-legalised KPU after 1993, a more serious threat emerged eight years later in the form of the Party of Regions. The KPU and Party of Regions have both inherited the Russophile, conservative 'imperial communist' ideological wing of the Soviet KPU.

As we approach the anniversary of two decades of Ukrainian independence, it is the Party of Regions that is Ukraine's most disciplined, best financed and most organized political force in Ukraine.

While national democrats are fracturing into ever more political parties and unable to unite, the Party of Regions has successfully merged with four former pro-Leonid Kuchma parties and attracted, through various means, many defectors from the senior ranks of the opposition, including some who voluntarily defected such as Taras Chornovil and Serhiy Holovatiy.



People search for any leftovers following a harvest in Kharkiv in 1933, during the Josef Stalin-ordered famine known as the Holodomor, which claimed several million lives – mostly of Ukrainians. (Courtesy photo)

Is it Ukraine's fate therefore to experience repeated cycles of national rebirth-democratization followed by conservative, Russophile counter-revolution? Let us hope not.

From the 1920s until the early 1930s, Ukraine experienced indigenization and Ukrainianisation that facilitated a national revival in culture, the arts and drama. Ukrainian peasants moving to the growing towns were becoming the new Ukrainian-speaking working class. National communists defended Ukraine's Ukrainianisation program and sovereignty. Ukrainianisation was accompanied by political and economic liberalization.

If permitted to continue eastern Ukraine's urban centers would have become Ukrainian speaking and the last two decades would have seen a different political class emerge in independent Ukraine. In 2004 all of Ukraine would have supported the Orange Revolution – not just Western and Central Ukraine.

The tragedy is that Ukraine's Russian speakers and Russian minority have voted for counter-revolutionary political forces, whether the KPU in the 1990s or Yanukovich and the Party of Regions since 2004. In Eastern Europe, national minorities have supported democratic revolutions against autocrats and strongly backed their country's integration into Europe; in Ukraine they have done the opposite.

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From the early 1930s until the mid 1950s, the height of Stalinism was accompanied by a massive counter-revolution against everything Ukrainian, with the teaching of history returning to the glorification of Imperial Russia. The Stalinist counter-revolution began with the Holodomor (murder famine) that led to the deaths of between 3.5-4 million Ukrainians in 1933.

Tim Snyder's excellent new book "Bloodlands" calculates that 5.5 million people died from famine in the USSR, of whom 3.5 were Ukrainian and 1 million were Kazakhs; Russians were in a decided minority. In addition, Snyder points out that Ukrainians and Poles living in Ukraine represented the majority of the victims in the Great Terror.

In the mid-1950s, Ukraine experienced its second cycle following the death of Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech revealing the horrors of Stalin's crimes leading de-Stalinisation accompanied by political and economic liberalization. Ukrainian cultural, and to some extent political, elites support the de-Stalinisation campaign and push powerful demands for a change to the manner in which history is written, the rehabilitation of countless murdered Ukrainian cultural figures and greater

republican sovereignty.

(Photo: Petro Shelest)



Petro Shelest, who headed the republic's KPU from 1963 until 1972, gave tacit encouragement to the de-Stalinisation process and moderate program of Ukrainianisation, advising Ukrainian writers that they should defend the Ukrainian language.

Shelest, who came from Kharkiv – the center of Ukrainian national communism in the 1920s, encouraged and distributed to local party branches the hugely influential Internationalism or Russification text written by Ivan Dziuba (today he is a fierce critic of Minister of Education Dmytro Tabachnyk).

The forces of Russophile counter-revolution were not asleep and operated through the KGB and two large regional branches of the Communist Party that were the bastions of conservatism – Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk.

In the mid 1960s and early 1970s, Ukraine was engulfed by large scale arrests of Ukrainian dissidents and cultural figures; the 1972 arrests were the largest to take place in the USSR since the Stalin era and were described by the samvydav (self-published) journal Ukrainski Visnyk (Ukrainian Herald) as the "Ukrainian Pogrom."

Most importantly, Ukraine's ruling elites under three presidents (Leonid Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma and Yanukovich) began their careers during the Shcherbytsky and Leonid Brezhnev "era of stagnation."

As the person in charge of ideological control, Kravchuk must have worked alongside the KGB and Moscow in repressing Ukrainian dissent and stagnating Ukrainian culture. Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, born far later, emerged as economic personalities and politicians only in the late 1980s and 1990s.

By the late 1970s, the human rights organization Amnesty International calculated that the Soviet Union had 10,000 political prisoners. Of these political prisoners, 40 percent were Ukrainians, representing a far higher proportion than their numbers in the Soviet population. Russians accounted for far fewer political prisoners than their share of the population.

The highest sentences handed down to dissidents in the Soviet Union were in Ukraine and Ukrainian political prisoners continued to die in the Gulag right through to the mid 1980s.

OUN-UPA (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists and Ukrainian Insurgent Army) nationalists convicted in the late 1940s and early 1950s for armed resistance to Soviet rule were sentenced to 25 years, released (if they survived) and then often either executed or re-sentenced for another term. Soviet executions of Ukrainian nationalists continued until 1987.

In 1972, a Russophile counter-revolution removed Shelest and replaced him with Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, who ruled Ukraine for the next 17 years. The Shcherbytsky era Russified Ukraine to a greater extent than the Stalin era, led to cultural stagnation and massive political repression with further arrests of opposition leaders in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In 1972, a Russophile counter-revolution removed Shelest and replaced him with Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, who ruled Ukraine for the next 17 years. The Shcherbytsky era Russified Ukraine to a greater extent than the Stalin era, led to cultural stagnation and massive political repression with further arrests of opposition leaders in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Nevertheless, Ukrainians remained stoic. With 40 members, the Ukrainian Helsinki Group became the largest of the Helsinki Groups established in Soviet republics, double in size to the Moscow Helsinki Group. In western Ukraine, the underground Uniate Catholic Church was the largest catacomb church in the world.

(Photo: Volodymyr Shcherbytsky)



The third cycle emerged in the late 1980s, during Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost. In 1989, Shcherbytsky was replaced by another KPU conservative, but the tide was already turning and the KPU was beginning to split between "imperial communists," on the one hand, and "sovereign (i.e. national) communists" and the KPU's democratic platform (mainly within the Komsomol Communist youth league) on the other.

In addition, in the same year, Rukh held its inaugural congress and as the Democratic Bloc went on to win a quarter of seats in the March 1990 elections.

During the next two decades, independent Ukraine experienced the flowering of Ukrainian national identity, the pursuit of a Ukrainophile educational policy and national identity and moderate state support for the Ukrainian language which grew in the educational system.

The two exceptions where education did not experience Ukrainianisation were Donetsk and the Crimea – the two regional strongholds of the Party of Regions. Throughout the majority of these two decades, Ukraine experienced democratization and a liberal political and media environment.

The exception to this liberalization was during Kuchma's second term in office, where Ukraine experienced the emergence of authoritarian tendencies. The major difference between Kuchma and Yanukovich is that the former could only possibly build a semi-authoritarian regime in Ukraine (for example, he never fully controlled parliament).

He even failed in building semi-authoritarianism as seen in the sweeping victory of the opposition and the 2004 Orange Revolution, which overturned an election rigged for Yanukovich, in his last year in office.

The third cycle's Russophile counter revolution took place after the election of Yanukovich in 2010 as he, and the neo-Soviet political culture of Donetsk and Crimea are far more likely to build a full Eurasian authoritarian regime. In 2011, only a year after Yanukovich was elected president, Ukraine was downgraded by Freedom House to the Kuchma era designation of "partly free."

If this took place only one year into Yanukovich's five-year presidency, it is obvious that by 2013, following inevitable election fraud in Ukraine's parliamentary elections, or 2015, following fraudulent presidential elections, that Freedom House will reduce Ukraine's position even further to "not free."

A category of "not free" would be the first time Ukraine has been defined as such and reflect the fact that the Yanukovich regime is far more of a threat to democracy than Kuchma ever was. Over the last weekend of November 2004, it was Prime Minister Yanukovich who allegedly instructed Interior Ministry special forces to advance on Kyiv to violently crush the Orange Revolution; Kuchma refused to issue the order.

It is time to seek to break out of this vicious historic cycle. Ukrainians, east and west, deserve far better.

Yanukovich and the Party of Regions represent the biggest threat to Ukrainian democratic and national rights since the Shcherbytsky-Brezhnev era. This is again not surprising as they are the inheritors of the conservative-russophile wing of the Soviet Communist Party in Ukraine.

This commentary is not meant to be an indictment of eastern Ukrainians, but of the deep-seated, inherited Soviet and Eurasian political culture found in that region of Ukraine. Indeed, eastern Ukrainians suffered the most from Russophile counter-revolution during the Stalin era.

Threats to Ukrainian national identity, language and culture and the crushing of Ukraine's hopes for democracy have always come from the east during the 1930s-1950s, 1970s-1980s and again today.

It is time to seek to break out of this vicious historic cycle. Ukrainians, east and west, deserve far better.

Taras Kuzio is an Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation visiting fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington. He is writing a Contemporary History of Ukraine.

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