1991-04

Radicalization of Independence in Ukraine

Fishel, Gene

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3466

Boston University
Radicalization of Independence in Ukraine

By GENE FISHEL
Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology & Policy

The emergence of a broadly based independence movement in the Ukraine can be dated from the inaugural congress of the Ukrainian Popular Movement (Rukh) in September 1989. The activities of Rukh, which now counts over 630,000 members as compared with 280,000 in 1989, have significantly altered the political landscape in the Soviet Union's second most populous republic, with 52 million inhabitants. Rukh—which means simply "movement" in Ukrainian—was originally organized by a group of reformist CPSU members headed by Ivan Drach (now Rukh's chairman) and Dmitriy Pavlichko to support the proclaimed democratization of the Soviet Union under Mikhail S. Gorbachev. Its program called for the sovereignty of the Ukraine within the USSR—the most that seemed to be politically achievable at the time.

It soon became clear, however, that the aspirations of the Ukrainian people far exceeded Gorbachev's willingness to meet them. The result was the radicalization of Rukh's program. The Second Rukh Congress, held in Kiev in October 1990, declared that the movement would not be satisfied by any political arrangement with the center short of complete Ukrainian independence. However, independence was to be achieved by gradual and peaceful means.

As a result, the movement's policy shifted from support of perestroika to the establishment of a coalition of antiestablishment forces in opposition to the CPSU. Drach has stated, "Confronting the party colossus in isolation is impossible. Rukh is undoubtedly the organization capable of uniting the scattered efforts (of various political parties and movements) and bringing all democratic forces of the republic together in
the struggle for the complete dismantling of the communist system and the creation of a sovereign democratic Ukrainian state." So far the movement has avoided fragmentation despite the desperate efforts of the CPU to divide its ranks. At the same time, the activities of *Rukh* have led to the creation of a number of other opposition political parties and groups that campaign under the Rukh umbrella as affiliated organizations and together constitute the **Democratic Bloc** (Narodna Rada). That bloc represents the opposition alliance to the CPU in the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet.

The principal political parties in the Ukraine are listed here, including the number of deputies from each party elected to the Ukrainian SSR Supreme Soviet in March 1990:

- **Party for the Democratic Rebirth of the Ukraine (PDVU)**, 43 deputies. Formerly called the Democratic Platform of the CPU, this party was founded by reformist communists headed by Volodymyr Filenko who left the CPSU, convinced that it was incapable of self-reformation. The party's platform calls for the genuine political and economic sovereignty of the Ukraine.

- **Ukrainian Democratic Party (UDP)**, 20 deputies. The chairman of the party is Yuri Badzio, while the Supreme Soviet delegation is led by Dmitriy Pavlichko, originally a co-founder of Rukh. The party opposes Ukrainian adherence to the new Union Treaty, advocating an independent Ukraine, a market economy, and political pluralism.

- **Ukrainian Republican Party (URP)**, 12 deputies. This was the first opposition party to be officially registered by the USSR Ministry of Justice (November 1990). The URP is headed by the prominent one-time political prisoner Levko Luk'yanenko. Former members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Union provide the core of the party's membership of 5,000-10,000. In addition to the long-term goal of an independent Ukrainian state, the URP program opposes the Union Treaty and calls for there call of the present Ukrainian SSR Supreme Soviet followed by new elections on a multiparty basis.

- **Ukrainian Green Party (UPZ)**, 5 deputies. This environmentalist party, which is an ally of *Rukh* on most issues, has achieved relative prominence largely as a result of the Chernobyl disaster and other health-threatening problems in the Ukraine.
• **Ukrainian National Party (UNP).** A small nationalist group based in L'vov, this party refuses to participate in parliamentary elections, since it rejects the entire political structure as currently constituted.

Turning to the political strength of the opposition alliance, the **Democratic Bloc** (Narodna Rada), led by the L'vov deputy Igor' Yukhnovskiy, holds a total of 151 seats in the Supreme Soviet (108 members of Rukh or Rukh-affiliated parties, plus 43 PDVU members), i.e., almost one-third of the 450 seats in the legislature. Despite its minority status, the bloc was successful in getting several of its policy proposals adopted by the Ukrainian SSR Supreme Soviet, notably the Declaration of State Sovereignty (July 16, 1990), the resolution on military service calling for service by draftees on Ukrainian territory only, and the inclusion of the republican question in the March 17 all-union referendum. Of 126 members of Supreme Soviet standing committees, over one-half belong to the bloc, and bloc members head 7 standing committees out of 23, including the important foreign affairs committee, chaired by Pavlichko.

It is important to note regional differences in electoral behavior. In a recent poll showing the gains made by the bloc at the expense of the CPU, Narodna Rada was favored 11 to 10 over the "Group of 239," as the conservative communist majority in the Supreme Soviet is called. However, in the three West Ukrainian Galician oblasti—L'vov, Ternopol', and Ivanovo-Frankovsk—the ratio was 37 to 1 in favor of the bloc. Although in total this region comprises under 10 percent of the Ukraine's population, over 47 percent of the delegates to the Second Rukh Congress came from these oblasti with an overwhelmingly Ukrainian population, which—owing to relatively late annexation by the Soviet Union and other historical factors—have remained largely unaffected by the process of russification. On the other hand, Rukh enjoys far less support in the (eastern) "Left-Bank Ukraine," including the Donetsk oblast', with much larger ethnic Russian populations.

Ethnic minorities such as Belorussians, Poles, and Jews also tend to shy away from Rukh. Almost 95 percent of the delegates to the Second Rukh Congress were ethnic
Ukrainians, while Russians and Jews represented tiny minorities of 3.8 and 0.3 percent, respectively. In the Crimea, the only Ukrainian oblast with a strong Russian majority (68 percent according to the 1979 census), the CPU majority led by 16 to 1. Thus a high level of russification is associated with strong support for the CPU, as opposed to Rukh and the other Ukrainian parties that advocate Ukrainian state independence.

The results of the all-union referendum of March 17, 1991, demonstrate the political divisions within the Ukraine. (See table for text of referendum questions and statistics by oblast). All the Ukrainian pro-independence parties naturally called for a "no" vote on the question of the preservation of the Union posed by the Moscow government (the "all-union question"). However, major divisions emerged on the "republican question," emphasizing Ukrainian state sovereignty, that was added to the referendum by the Ukrainian SSR government. Whereas the moderate wing of Rukh and the UDP urged the public to vote "yes" on this question, both Rukh radicals and the URP called for a "no" vote. The results for the three Galician oblasti (L'vov, Ivano-Frankovsk, and Ternopol') were particularly striking. The region voted overwhelmingly in favor of the "Galician Question" that called unambiguously for Ukrainian national independence, rejecting both the all-union (by a landslide) and the republican questions. The Galician radical opposition to the CPU had added its own question to the referendum since it rejected the republican question that required a vote on the preservation of the Union, albeit in modified form. The significance of the ethnic composition of the population and historical factors as a determinant of voter behavior is clear also from the results in the Transcarpathian oblast, where—although the majority of the population is Ukrainian (77 percent)—ethnic minorities constitute well over 21 percent (Hungarians 13.7 percent, Russians 5.6 percent, Rumanians 2.3 percent). In Transcarpathia the all-union question was approved by over 60 percent, while the republican question received support from over 69 percent of the population.

Fierce political controversy will continue to rage over the question of Ukrainian political independence. The Declaration of State Sovereignty represented only a short-term compromise between the CPU in retreat and the surging opposition. Now, thanks to the
confusing responses to the various questions on the March referendum, both sides are able to claim victory for their policies. The majority of the CPU deputies holds that the overwhelming support in the referendum for the "republican question" will lead to the creation of a semi-sovereign Ukraine which will remain part of the Union. On the other hand, Rukh, with the exception of the radical wing that sees the republican question as an unnecessary compromise, views the 80 percent agreement with this question, compared with only 70 percent support for the all-union question, as a political victory for its own platform. Thus the highly ambiguous results of the referendum satisfy no one. What is clear is that, barring a complete and brutal crackdown by the central government, Rukh and the pro-independence parties allied with it will continue to enjoy wide support among the Ukrainian population as political discontent grows.

Copyright Boston University Trustees 1991
Unless otherwise indicated, all articles appearing in this journal have been commissioned especially for Perspective. This article was originally published at http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol1/Fishel.html.