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NATIONALISM IN SOVIET UKRAINE

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Nationalism in Soviet Ukraine

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The Soviet Union is a multi-national state in an age of nationalism. Of the three great European land empires of the nineteenth century -- the Austrian, Turkish, and Russian -- only the Russian is still intact. Although the vital signs of the Soviet empire remain strong, many of its national minorities -- which number over 100, and make up almost half of the Soviet population -- continue to resist the "melting pot" process, and some of them are becoming more rather than less assertive. Accordingly, the nationalities problem is one of the most persistent and vexing domestic problems confronting Soviet authorities today. This paper, a distillation of a research study, "Nationalism in Soviet Ukraine," examines nationalist tendencies among the largest and most influential Soviet national minority. It estimates the extent to which centrifugal and destabilizing forces are at work in the Ukraine, and evaluates Moscow's efforts to contain them.

Forces of Integration and Forces of Separation

Many factors contribute to the vitality of Ukrainian

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national feeling and tend to stiffen Ukrainian resistance to
Russification:

- They have a rich cultural heritage and retain a degree of pride that they are more "European" than the Russians.
- They occupy an area of great economic significance, which serves both as a granary and as a major mineral producer of the Soviet Union.
- The sheer weight of their numbers (Ukrainians make up 17 percent of the Soviet population) adds to their strength.

Yet, these centrifugal tendencies may be diluted by other forces:

- Ethnically and linguistically the Ukrainians have considerable affinity to the Russians, who are also members of the East Slav family.
- The eastern part of the Ukraine -- which contains most of the republic's population, resources, and industry -- has belonged to the Russian or Soviet empire during most of the modern period. East Ukrainians are close to the Russians in cultural and religious background.
- Soviet authorities tend to accept Ukrainians, fellow Slavs, on an almost equal footing with Russians in elite recruitment.

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-- Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, both of whom rose through the Ukrainian Communist Party, the Ukrainian Party has enjoyed a privileged position.

The Ukrainians are more completely integrated into the Soviet system than most other Soviet national minorities, and the system has been relatively good to them. Their similarity to the Russians may give central authorities some grounds for hope that assimilation may ultimately solve the Ukrainian problem.

Russification in the Ukraine

A survey of linguistic and demographic trends suggests that time may indeed be on the side of the forces of assimilation in East Ukraine. The process is slow, but the Russian element in the cities of East Ukraine is growing, through assimilation of Ukrainians and migration of Russians. Linguistic Russification there is proceeding steadily. In the urban areas of East Ukraine today the number of ethnic Russians and linguistically Russified Ukrainians (those who claim Russian as their native tongue) roughly equals the number of unassimilated Ukrainians.

In West Ukraine the statistics tell a somewhat different story. West Ukraine has more than held its own against Russian encroachments. This fact points to an important dimension of the Ukrainian problem. While East Ukraine shares much of its long history with Russia, the Soviet annexation of West Ukraine,

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occurring only during World War II, introduced into the Soviet system an alien and generally hostile population which can be Russified, if at all, only through a massive and prolonged effort.

While assimilation is gradually taking place in East Ukraine, this does not preclude the possibility that Ukrainian opposition to Russian rule may be increasing, partly because of the West Ukrainian infection. The two tendencies would not necessarily be incompatible. The very forces of urbanization, social mobilization, and mass education, which work to efface national differences in the long run, may simultaneously heighten consciousness of those differences in the short run. The typical Ukrainian dissident is an urban intellectual of peasant stock, the person most aware both of the Ukrainian identity and of the forces working to weaken this identity. The protests of Ukrainian nationalists in the cities are in part provoked by the very success of Russification, by the gradual assimilation of Ukrainians, the demeaning of the indigenous culture, and the competition for jobs between Russians and Ukrainians.

Nationalist Dissent in the Ukraine

Nationalism in the Ukraine does appear to be growing, or at least becoming more vocal. During the last several decades

Ukrainian dissent has undergone an evolution -- from the armed, anti-Soviet resistance of World War II, to the formation of conspiratorial groups in the 1950s, to the flourishing of open protest in the 1960s. The period of the late 1960s witnessed the emergence of a new type of dissent, avowedly Marxist in orientation, which appealed to new Soviet elites for whom traditional Ukrainian nationalism seemed outdated. Dissidents since then have been less organized and more fragmented, less clandestine and more overt, less single-minded in their quest for national sovereignty and more variegated, less militant but perhaps more geographically widespread. Overt dissent probably reached its peak between 1968 and 1970, in the wake of the invasion of Czechoslovakia and during the period when Petr Shelest, then First Secretary of the Ukrainian Party, was permitting dissident writers a measure of latitude. Since Shelest's removal in 1972, his successor's campaign for ideological conformity has put the dissidents on the defensive, but they have not been completely silenced and the reintroduction of more draconian measures may have radicalized them.

A geographical and sociological breakdown of dissidents reveals that dissent is not completely confined to an isolated intelligentsia or to one section of the Ukraine.

-- While nationalism has always been stronger

in West Ukraine, in the late 1960s and early 1970s dissent seems to have been on the rise in the cities of East Ukraine as well.

- Larger portions of the educated classes have been involved in protests since the 1960s. In addition to the few intellectuals who have cast their lot with open dissent, large numbers of the "establishment" intelligentsia sympathize with nationalist views in greater or lesser degree.
- Ukrainian nationalism probably has a stronger popular base than Russian liberal dissent, embracing both urban elements and, again especially in the case of West Ukraine, the peasantry.

Popular support of Ukrainian intellectual dissent, however, is largely latent.

- If nationalist disturbances involving the peasantry have occurred in recent years, we do not know about them. Overt nationalism today is essentially an urban phenomenon.
- Even in the cities cooperation between workers and intellectuals is probably impeded by the general failure of the nationalist intelligentsia to articulate lower class grievances concerning living standards and material welfare.

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The case of the Ukrainian dissidents is strengthened somewhat by support from other dissatisfied elements in Soviet society.

- Mutual distrust prevented an alliance between Jews and Ukrainians in the past, but Ukrainian dissidents today make clear their distaste for anti-Semitism, and they are receiving some cautious backing from Jews in the Ukraine.
- Russian liberal dissidents, traditionally lukewarm or hostile toward Ukrainian separatist sentiments, are showing more sympathy toward Ukrainian aspirations, while the Ukrainians are defining their crusade more broadly and stressing its connection with the common struggle for civil liberties in the Soviet Union.
- Christian dissent continues to reinforce Ukrainian nationalism. The Uniate Church, which adheres to the Orthodox rite but recognizes the authority of the Pope in Rome, has traditionally been a bearer of Ukrainian national feeling in West Ukraine. The Uniate Church was officially dissolved by Moscow in 1947, but there were indications that Uniate believers in the Ukraine became restive during the 1960s.

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External support for the Ukrainian nationalists may in some cases encourage Ukrainian dissidents to engage in bolder acts of defiance.

-- As the regime's detente policies make it increasingly vulnerable to criticism "from the other shore," and open up channels of communication between the Soviet Union and the West, organized protest of Ukrainian emigres in the US and Canada becomes a potential shield for Ukrainian dissidents.

-- The PRC in recent years has stepped up its efforts to exploit the Ukrainian nationality problem via propaganda and contacts with Ukrainian emigre groups. A long drawn out and debilitating Sino-Soviet war might stimulate Ukrainian fractionalism, but it is unlikely that Ukrainian nationalists would side with the Chinese regime, which they probably dislike more than the Soviet one.

-- The Ukraine is much more susceptible to East European influence, due to the historical association of West Ukraine with bordering East European countries, and the polyglot character of the affected populations on both

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sides. Nationalist movements in Eastern Europe could spark repercussions in the Ukraine, as happened on a limited scale during the Czechoslovak crisis of 1968.

Although nationalism in the Ukraine appears to be waxing rather than waning, a serious separatist effort is not in sight. Even if the Ukrainians resented Russian domination as greatly as do the East Europeans, at least two major factors make the Ukrainian situation different from that of Poland or Czechoslovakia.

-- The Ukraine has no national military units of its own. The various Soviet nationalities are thoroughly and deliberately integrated in the Soviet military; troops stationed in the Ukraine probably do not contain a higher than proportionate percentage of Ukrainians.

-- Although the Ukrainian Party and government are in the hands of native Ukrainians, which is not the case with many Soviet republics, if put to the test, the indigenous elite would probably by and large cast its lot with the regime. The leaders of the Ukrainian Party are more loyal to Moscow than were their counterparts in Czechoslovakia. The central regime has accorded Ukrainian Party

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apparatchiks career advantages perhaps sufficient
to prevent them from nurturing significant grievances.

Nationalist Tendencies in the Ukrainian Party

Yet the Ukrainian Party itself has not been completely free of nationalist tendencies. While a Ukrainian Communist Party leader's primary loyalty is to the Party, few Ukrainian officials are so rigidly loyal to the center as to place the interests of the all-union Party always above those of the Ukraine, or so opportunistic as to be totally insensitive to the needs and desires of the people among whom they live. In varying degrees they are responsive to those desires, at times because of the practical difficulties encountered in administering unpopular central policies, at times because popular desires sometimes coincide with the Communist official's desire to win economic concessions for "his" region. Moreover, a Ukrainian leader may attempt to manipulate nationalism as a lever for increasing his political influence in Moscow.

The case of Petr Shelest, First Secretary of the Ukrainian Party from 1963 to May 1972, provides an example of a Ukrainian leader who displayed attitudes which could be labelled "nationalist," in the broadest sense of the word. His identification with and toleration of Ukrainian national sentiment played a major -- if not the major -- role in paving the way for his removal.

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Shelest's "nationalism" was manifested in several ways:

- He was guilty of economic "localism," seen in his bold defense of the interests of the Ukrainian coal-mining industry.
- He appeared unwilling to throw his full weight behind campaigns to repress nationalist dissent.
- He encouraged the use of the Ukrainian language in education.
- He permitted literary expressions of Ukrainian national pride, and himself wrote a book which glorified aspects of Ukrainian history in impolitic fashion.

Shelest's "nationalism" may have gone no deeper than the desire of a regional leader to strengthen his power base, and to gain support in his personal vendetta with Brezhnev. Whatever his motivation, he did act in ways which associated him with Ukrainian national feeling.

Since it is unlikely that Shelest would have taken the stands he did without the support of important segments of the Ukrainian Party, it is probable that nationalist tendencies are still present in the upper echelons of the Ukrainian Party. At present Shcherbitsky, Shelest's replacement as

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First Secretary, seems to have the Ukrainian Party in hand. He has purged those who dragged their feet in the campaign for ideological purity, and many of those who had clear connections with Shelest. Above all, he has gone out of his way to emphasize that the Ukrainian Party looks to Moscow for its marching orders. Yet in the Khrushchev era Shcherbitsky reportedly showed some mettle in his dealings with central authorities. He is so closely identified with Brezhnev that it would be difficult for him to do a volte-face on nationalities policy while Brezhnev remains in office, but if a succession brings a change in the political climate he might find it expedient to seek accommodation with nationalist elements in the Ukraine.

Soviet Nationality Policy in the Years Ahead

Under Brezhnev the leadership has taken a hard line against all forms of Ukrainian nationalism. But campaigns to root out nationalism are hard to sustain for long periods, since they run the danger of exacerbating the problem they were intended to solve. And the vice of "localism" can be expected to rear its head periodically. A regional Party boss, whatever his nationality, is responsible for the economic performance of his union republic. He naturally lobbies for its interests in the allocation of resources.

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Both after Stalin's death and after Khrushchev's ouster, the temporary diffusion of authority resulted in a relaxation of Russification efforts and a growth in assertiveness of union republic leaders. A similar relaxation may well follow Brezhnev's departure, but will probably be as short-lived as previous "thaws." On the whole, central authorities can be expected to continue a "muddle through" nationalities policy, to continue alternating spasms of repression with periods of malign neglect, in ad hoc efforts to keep a nagging problem under control without aggravating it. They may hope that long-range forces of economic modernization and social integration will do what out-and-out repression cannot -- undercut minority nationalism by gradually eliminating the national differences which lie at its base.

If particularistic attitudes in the Ukraine and in other border regions persist, and come to be perceived as a serious threat to the central regime, however, it is conceivable that a different approach might be adopted. The preponderance of the Great Russian nationality would make it difficult to establish a genuinely federal system, even if this were desired. Consequently, if concessions came, they would probably take the form of granting greater de facto autonomy to a few key nationalities, in an effort to buy their support for the system.

Yet the impulse toward Russian domination and the creation of a unitary state is strong. This urge, with roots in the old

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imperial tradition, is also strengthened by Soviet ideology. The main thrust of Soviet Marxist ideology has been toward centralized political and economic decision-making, and uniform cultural forms. The main line of Soviet nationalities policy over the years, even with its "fits and starts," has been an attempt, generally, to transform the old multi-national Russian empire into a Soviet "nation" whose citizens, regardless of nationality, owe their primary loyalty to the Soviet state. In any event, political centralization in a state where one nationality is larger than all the others combined, as well as being their historic master, inevitably results in domination by that nationality. Moreover, from the standpoint of Soviet economic planners, efficiency is enhanced if they are able to treat the entire USSR as a single economic entity, placing industries and assigning crops where most profitable or strategically useful, without regard for local desires.

If culture and language are to be "internationalized" or standardized throughout the Soviet Union, Russian language and culture is the logical vehicle for this purpose. This process of "Russianization," by which Russian language and culture become universalized to serve the needs of a multi-national empire for communication and integration, can be defended on pragmatic and even ideological grounds. In practice, however, "Russianization" has led to "Russification," the process by which the regime

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attempts to transform the minorities objectively and psychologically into Russians. Here considerations of Realpolitik are probably paramount -- it is the desire for more political control over the minorities which leads central authorities to strive for the eradication of national differences.

It is even possible that Soviet leaders might move further in this direction, toward a radical reduction of the authority of the union republics, perhaps resulting in the formal abolition of the Soviet Federation, and open association of the Communist regime with traditional Russian nationalism. There is little indication that the present Soviet leaders are Great Russian chauvinists consumed with an emotional desire to convert alien populations. But some of them today flirt with Russian nationalism because of its possible uses as a political tool, recalling the fact that, during World War II, Stalin discarded Marxist slogans in favor of nationalist ones with greater emotional appeal. With the waning of ideology as a force capable of motivating people and legitimizing the regime, some leaders may be casting about for a substitute "integrative myth" for the regime.

After the Russian Republic itself, there is no area of the Soviet empire more important to Moscow than the Ukraine. Neither the center nor the province are easy in their present relationship and in one way or another this is bound to change in coming years.

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This change may be gradual and evolutionary, but it may also result from a decision in Moscow that special measures are required. If so, the direction of change will more likely be toward greater centralization, rather than a devolution of power.