

Ukraine and Russia: Two Countries—One Transformation¹

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Introduction and background

Ukraine made a significant contribution to the fall of the USSR. Without Ukraine, it was inconceivable for the Soviet Empire to survive, but if Ukraine had not seceded, then a new union of three East Slavic nations—that is, a reduced version of the USSR—would have been possible. After the failed coup attempt on 19–21 August 1991, all the Union Republics of the USSR except for Russia declared their withdrawal from the Soviet Union. Politically, Ukraine's independence in effect meant establishing independence from Russia, since the Soviet Union had de facto ceased to exist as early as the fall of 1991.

Under Boris Yeltsin, Russia in a sense incorporated the USSR, and even if, in terms of international law, Ukraine seceded from the USSR, in reality it left Russia. It broke away from the common state formed with the Russian people and began a new attempt to create a Ukrainian state without Russia. Moreover, under the then-prevailing conditions, “without Russia” meant, in one way or another, “against Russia.” This was because Russia, for its part, was not prepared to reconcile itself to Ukrainian independence. Therefore, the political sovereignty of Ukraine could be achieved only as a counterweight to Russia. Concerning this aim, all of Ukraine's political forces in 1991—namely, the national democrats led by the People's Movement (Rukh) of Ukraine, and the national Communists led by Leonid Kravchuk—held one and the same opinion.

In 1991, the independence of Ukraine was frowned upon in the West, not only in Russia. In the main, Ukraine faced a lack of understanding and a lack of acceptance. Maintaining Ukrainian sovereignty was inconceivable without putting some distance between itself and Russia and without a sharp denunciation of any Russian attempt to claim that a Russian–Ukrainian entity still continued to exist. That is why, from the very beginning of its independent existence, Ukraine regarded the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as an instrument of civilized divorce rather than a basis for renewed integration. Ukraine's policy was to prevent by all possible means the CIS from assuming the attributes of a supranational or international legal entity. Ukraine refused to join the Tashkent Treaty on collective security and did not ratify the CIS Charter.

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The first years after the proclamation of Ukraine's independence were characterized by a policy of demonstratively distancing itself from Russia. Significantly, this policy was pursued despite an essentially total economic dependence on Russia. Russian politicians and the Russian general public responded to this distancing with anger and verbal aggression. These policies of distancing and confrontation had two consequences:

1. A considerable segment of Ukraine's general public in the east and south of the country rejected the policy of distancing the country from Russia. This became one of the reasons for Kravchuk's defeat in the presidential election of 1994 and the victory of Leonid Kuchma, since it was Kuchma who, at least during the election campaign, promoted closer ties with Russia.
2. The aggressive anti-Ukrainian rhetoric in Russia played an important role in consolidating Ukraine's statehood. Initially, neither the political class nor the general public in Russia was ready to recognize Ukraine's independence as something permanent. As a result, the serious conflicts existing between the two sides were exacerbated. These conflicts were related to issues such as ownership, custody, and control of nuclear weapons in Ukrainian territory, and the future disposition of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, Crimea, and Sevastopol. In addition, there were disputes about the Russian minority in Ukraine and the problems related to Ukrainization of the state and society.

In the early 1990s, the approach taken to resolving all of these specific questions foreshadowed a (potentially) quite belligerent confrontation between Ukraine and Russia. Russia demanded that Ukraine give up its nuclear weapons, but initially Ukraine was not prepared to do so. Russia laid claim to the whole Black Sea fleet, while Ukraine demanded that it be divided. Russia regarded Sevastopol as a city "located on its territory," while Ukraine viewed this not only as a case of disregarding international law but also as casting doubt on its political independence.

Although all these conflicts were sharp and at times at the center of public attention, they were largely settled by 1997. Some issues still remained controversial and unsolved, including the questions of the use and acceptance of the Russian language and Russian culture in Ukraine. Disputes over these issues will continue in the future and, depending on the political atmosphere, they may significantly complicate Russian-Ukrainian relations. Conflicts arising from Ukraine's economic dependence on Russia also remain unsettled. Ukraine still has large debt arrears, and Russia's threats to reduce the volume of energy supplies it makes available hangs like a sword of Damocles over Ukraine.

In spite of these remaining and unresolved issues, at present one can say that Russian-Ukrainian relations have, to a large extent, normalized. At least they have improved compared with the initial years of Ukraine's independence. One gets

the impression that people in Russia have accepted the fact that an independent Ukraine will remain on the map of European political geography. Interestingly, even Ukraine's reactionary Communists have increasingly become supporters of Ukrainian independence.

Given this background, a number of questions arise both about the future pattern of developments in each country and about the evolution of relations between them. Does it finally appear to be without question that Ukraine and Russia are two separate states, each of which will go its own way in the future? Has the independence of the two states taken root so definitely after a decade that their common past has receded into the background? Can it be that different political cultures are taking shape in the two countries?

A paradoxical situation has arisen. While Ukraine has achieved its own statehood, which is increasingly being recognized even in Russia, at the same time Russia and Ukraine are virtually identical in terms of their levels of internal political, social, and economic development. In order to account for these similarities, it is not sufficient to refer to the fact that Russia and Ukraine have common roots in the Soviet Union, since other territories—Estonia, Latvia, and Georgia, for example—were also parts of the Russian and later the Soviet empires for centuries. Nevertheless, the political evolution of these countries in the post-communist period has differed fundamentally from that of Russia. As for Ukraine, one gets the impression that in the processes of transformation, Russia and Ukraine have in fact been coming closer to each other in terms of their political orders and economic relations.

The political order

First, let us consider the political order. In both states, signs of authoritarian presidential regimes have been becoming increasingly evident. The presidents of the two countries have concentrated more and more power in their own hands. At the same time, the role of their parliaments has diminished, and these institutions have become submissive and insignificant.

Political parties are still in the nascent stage; in neither country has a stable spectrum of political parties formed. Both in Russia and Ukraine the Communist Party is the largest party, and the only one with a nationwide presence. But this is a party that is not, in its origins and in its former self-conception, a political party in the Western sense. In recent years, instead of the power of parties, various "parties of power" have arisen that are auxiliaries of the executive rather than the legislative branch.

By the end of 2001, the significance of the State Duma in Russia and the Verkhovna Rada in Ukraine has declined to a point where they play a lesser role than they did in 1999. The parliaments do not any longer play an independent political role, but neither do they any longer act as checks on reform and as adversaries to the incumbent presidents, as they had done for many years before 1999.

At the same time, they do not play any role in moving reform forward. In each country, the political initiative belongs exclusively to the presidential administration and, below it, to vertically-structured and hierarchical executive bodies.

President Putin has augmented the executive hierarchy, and in so doing he evades and contravenes the Russian Constitution. President Kuchma has tried—although so far in vain—to change the Constitution of Ukraine via a referendum. He is determined to expand the role and powers of the President through a constitutional amendment, but since November 2000 the “Gongadze scandal” has put his plans on hold.

In both countries, the presidents that are now ruling in an authoritarian manner came to power as a result of popular elections. In other words, society and the people want to be ruled in the way that they are now being ruled, and by the presidents currently in office. But it should be noted that the elections that brought the present incumbents to power were manipulated, and not only by means of the mass media. For the production and dispersal of election propaganda, both successful candidates, Putin and Kuchma, had the whole state machinery at their disposal. After his successful re-election, Kuchma fired those regional governors in whose regions an insufficient number of votes were cast in his favor. During the presidential election in Russia in March 2000, massive voting fraud was reported. Nevertheless, in all cases the OSCE and other observers present at the elections gave a positive assessment of the elections by referring to them as “free and fair.” It is indicative of the state of society that, even though facts related to the manipulation and falsification of the election are generally known, these facts are of concern to nobody and do not harm the prestige of the elected presidents at all.

In Ukraine and in Russia there is no censorship of the mass media in the form that it took in the bad old days. Nevertheless, one can only speak with some reservations about the freedom of the mass media, especially the electronic media, in both countries. Television and radio are basically dependent on the state because of the presence of political bodies governing broadcast media, and because of special selection of their personnel. Perhaps in Russia over the last several years the broadcast media have enjoyed greater freedom from state supervision than in Ukraine. In the recent past, however, Russia has brought the extent to which television and radio stations are dependent on the Presidential Administration to the same level as that which exists in Ukraine. It should be added that some newspapers and magazines in both countries, though not those in mass circulation, enjoy a reputation for political opposition that is almost absent in the parliaments.

The economic structures

One can also see many common features in the countries’ economic structures. Their economic development has turned in the direction of the so-called third way, something between the socialist planned economy and a private market economy.

The state-dominated command economy has been destroyed, but a lack of conviction, courage, and political will has thwarted consistent introduction of a market economy. Thus, the process of economic reform has been stranded, at least from a Western viewpoint, halfway.

The real economic situation, both in Russia and Ukraine, is characterized by a high degree of interference and a narrow, clannish, corporative merging of the political administration and the economic management elites, as well as a lack of the rule of law. Present managerial circles are very much interested in preserving the current status quo.

This is why proposals for radical economic reforms run counter to vested interests, and therefore encounter fierce resistance from certain quarters of the state bureaucracy and business elites. Simultaneously, and for the first time in the post-communist period, the Russian and Ukrainian economies can boast some sign of recovery. Moreover, a number of laws have recently been introduced in both countries that will better adapt their respective economies for the market. These reforms include privatization of land, reduction of taxes, and a strengthening of the accountability of businesses. The laws that have been developed are more far-reaching in Russia, but the basic problem is the same in both countries: implementation of these laws depends on an unwilling and corrupt bureaucracy whose actions may bring the reforms to naught. The problem is not a lack of good laws but a lack of good governance, as both international agencies and non-governmental analysts tend to agree by putting these two countries near the end of a long list measuring the comparative capacity and accountability of states.

Russia and Ukraine: differences as well as similarities

The astonishing similarity between the state structures in the two countries has naturally led to similar outcomes, namely political and economic stabilization at a very low level. The great social tensions within the countries, pervasive corruption, and widespread popular pessimism have not resulted (and are unlikely to result) in social and political upheavals. Attempted coups of the kind that took place in the early 1990s in Russia also seem unlikely. One of the reasons for this stability is the people's passivity and the lack of a civil society. If there had been a full-fledged civil society in Ukraine and Russia of the kind that exists in Western Europe or North America, these countries would long since have plunged into anarchy.

I have mentioned the striking parallels between the post-communist reality existing in Russia and Ukraine. This is not to say that there are no differences. For example, the original traditions and conditions that exist in the western part of Ukraine are absolutely specific, with no counterpart in Russia. Another difference is that church life in Ukraine, not only in Galicia and Volyn but generally, is more active than in Russia. In addition, far fewer monuments to Lenin remain in Kiev

than in Moscow. In Ukraine, 7 November—the day of the October Revolution—has not been celebrated as a public holiday since the year 2000.

In analyzing the political order, a striking difference is that the federal structure has not been introduced in Ukraine. This may be the product of a fear that the turn of events that has been observed in Russia as a consequence of its federal structure would be repeated in Ukraine. Currently, Russia is re-centralizing power, and the autonomy of its constituent parts is being curtailed. In Ukraine, by contrast, there are plans to introduce a second chamber of parliament in which the regions would be represented. Hence, over time, there is likely to be a convergence in this field as well.

Striking differences are also apparent in the foreign policy sphere. This is true both in how the two countries view themselves and how they set goals in the international arena. Russia regards itself as a great power, and still continues to demand that it be heeded and involved in settling all international conflicts. However, there has been a noticeable sobering up in recent years with regard to Russia's own weaknesses as well as its capabilities. For example, a realistic self-assessment recently resulted in Russia joining the international coalition against terrorism under United States leadership.

Ukraine is not burdened with an imperial past, and it is in the process of seeking its own place in the post-imperial present. This is not an easy thing to do. Since the moment President Kuchma came to power, Ukraine's foreign policy has rejected the implementation of either of the extreme alternatives of orientation towards Russia or towards the West. Instead, Ukraine has sought a rapprochement with both Russia and the West. Kuchma's leadership, however, emphasizes that in the long run Ukraine is determined to become a member of the European Union. This is in sharp contrast to Ukraine's clearly demonstrated attitude of distancing itself from any supranational integration with Russia. As for its future prospects, the leaders of Ukraine prefer integration with the West to integration with the East.

Currently, however, Ukraine's membership in the EU can be considered to be something close to a dream or a phantasm for two reasons.

First, the pattern of internal political evolution in Ukraine is becoming more estranged from the path of development that can be witnessed in the European Union, not closer to it.

Second, the EU does not currently hold out any prospect of Ukrainian membership, even if Ukraine was to fulfill the criteria established as a condition for joining the Union (the Copenhagen criteria). This is in contrast to the offer of membership from the EU to all of the states of the Balkans and to Turkey, provided that they first meet these criteria. The EU has apparently made a decision to adopt identical approaches to managing its relations with Russia and Ukraine. It is not prepared to accept the fact that the Ukrainian political leadership sees Ukraine as a member of the EU in the future, while the political leadership in Russia does not have the same vision.

In sum, the similarities in the internal political evolution of Russia and Ukraine in the post-communist period are simultaneously impressive and puzzling. These similarities exist in sharp contrast to Ukraine's constant emphasis on its independence and Russia's claim to be unique. Currently, the parallelism of structures in the two countries is even increasing. As for their international policies, these countries have different views about what path should be taken in the present, and different aspirations regarding their future. For this reason, the re-establishment of any common state is highly unlikely, even as a loose confederation.