WILL UKRAINE SURVIVE 1994?

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Will Ukraine survive 1994? Increasingly, the answer one encounters is "no." Political deadlock, economic crisis, and ethnic rumblings in the Donbas and Crimea have transformed the post-independence euphoria of late 1991 into the gloom of late 1993. Worst-case scenarios—collapse, secession, decay—have replaced best-case scenarios—integration into Europe, economic prosperity, political dynamism.

Both views are wrong. Just as there was little cause for the exaggerated optimism of two years ago, so, too, there is just as little cause for the exaggerated pessimism of today. Ukraine's rapid and effortless transformation into a functioning market democracy was never in the cards; its consignment to the ash heap of history is just as unlikely.

Legacies of the Past

Like all the other non-Russian successor states, independent Ukraine emerged from the wreckage of a totalitarian empire, the USSR. The collapse of totalitarianism left an institutional vacuum within the society and the economy, while the collapse of empire left an institutional vacuum within the polity. In a word, Ukraine lacked a civil society, a market, and a state, and without these it could hardly have a coherent sense of national identity, democracy, and rule of law. It did possess a highly educated citizenry and numerous informal organizations, extensive blackmarketeering and organized crime, and administrators, former dissidents, and would-be elites. None of these translated into *institutions*—established behavioral procedures and rules of the game.

The task before Ukraine was immense: the construction of all the characteristics of a "normal" country. Some reflection would have suggested that attaining all these goals quickly and simultaneously in a country devastated by seventy years of totalitarianism and several hundred years of imperialism was impossible. A Great Leap Forward of such magnitude would have dwarfed even Mao Zedong's utopian attempt to overcome structural constraints by a massive exertion of will.

In particular, the obstreperous nature of Ukraine's postimperial and posttotalitarian legacies meant that the rapid and full-scale introduction of the market—when defined as a set of economic institutions—was equally impossible. Markets presuppose effective, rule of law states: so extensive a set of economic exchanges necessitates a polity capable of monitoring transactions and the associated costs. Without rule of law, marketization becomes tantamount to the kind of gangster capitalism that has taken root in Russia. Big Bang approaches are a guarantee of the nonattainment of the market and, perhaps, of the discreditation of reform in general.

Post-Soviet states have no alternative to going slow, muddling through, decaying, and hoping for the best. This is not to say that reforms should not be pursued; obviously, they should. But it is to say that, while breakthroughs for the better cannot occur, breakdowns—or breakthroughs toward the much worse—can. Post-Soviet states such as Ukraine thus have one overriding goal—to avoid pursuing rash policies that could lead to their destabilization—and one secondary goal—to pursue measured reform within the parameters of the possible and not the desirable. Utopianism is the fastest way to disaster under post-Soviet conditions.

External Challenges

Seen from this viewpoint, Ukraine's current predicament—and it is a predicament—is not as serious or as hopeless as it seems. Although Ukraine is a mess, so, too, is every other post-Soviet state, and although Ukraine's "messness" is likely to increase before it decreases, so, too, is that of its neighbors in

the former USSR. All of the successor states are in trouble, and all of them will remain in trouble. Hence, all of them are more or less equally liable to survive or to collapse. While it is possible to imagine fifteen adjacent states collapsing and disappearing at more or less the same time, such a scenario—under peacetime conditions at least—is surely implausible.

Although the possibility of war is not as farfetched as one would like it to be, it would not work to Ukraine's disadvantage. Indeed, the emergence of a genuinely hostile Russia would translate into Ukraine's rapid integration into European economic and security structures and its concomitant transformation into a client state of the United States. As an East European version of a South Korea, Ukraine would become the recipient of large-scale Western—in particular, American—military and economic assistance that would guarantee its stability, if not its prosperity.

Naturally, such a scenario is premised on Russia's own transformation into a predator state. The conventional wisdom notwithstanding, that development seems plausible in view of Russia's bigness, its political traditions, its postimperial baggage (pieds-noirs and soldiers stationed in the republics), and the evident commitment of its policy makers to pursue "enlightened imperialism," spheres of influence, and Monroe Doctrines in the near abroad. The last point is especially significant as neo-imperialism and great power nostalgia are mainstream views in Russian politics; in this regard the manic imperialism of Vladimir Zhirinovsky differs from them in terms more of style than of substance. The burden of proof is on those who believe—hoping against hope?— that the pacific statements of individual policy makers such as Boris Yeltsin will suffice to overcome the force of history, institutions, culture, and interests.

Russia's aggressiveness, therefore, could be Ukraine's salvation. The United States and Western Europe would be more than willing to turn a blind eye to Russia's intervention in—perhaps even annexation of—Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Estonia. But even Western policy makers would draw the line at Ukraine. With or without nuclear weapons, Ukraine is too important geopolitically for its absorption by Russia to be tolerated.

Despite Foreign Minister Kozyrev's recent displays of chest-pounding, one would still like to think that Russian policy makers recognize the validity of this view. They *should*, as Russia's "objective" geopolitical interest is not to absorb Ukraine, but to keep it cowed and uncertain, thereby transforming it into a reluctant vassal. Posttotalitarian Russia could defeat posttotalitarian Ukraine in a military encounter, but it would be hardpressed to control such an unruly province. A pliant Ukraine might be the preferred option of Russia—*and* of the West—but pliancy, while hardly a desirable condition, does presuppose existence, and it is the continued existence of Ukrainian statehood that is at issue here.

Kiev's exaggerated worries notwithstanding, it is hard to imagine Russia's attacking Ukraine by means of, say, a massive tank assault. Russia's own economy could hardly sustain such an adventure; its army, while still dangerous, is barely capable of disciplining its own recruits; its elites are scarcely able to maintain order in Moscow. Hegemony may still be possible, and troublemaking, muscleflexing, and instability seem inevitable, but there is no way for a crippled giant on the brink of economic and political collapse physically to occupy its neighbors, especially its large neighbors. Russia's imperial days are over. The empire, it bears repeating, is quite dead.

Internal Challenges

The continued existence of Ukraine also depends on a host of domestic factors. Here, too, the diagnosis is mixed—and that in itself is an enormous advance over the conventional wisdom, whichsees only Ukraine's troubles. Ukraine, as I argue below, has experienced both successes and failures with respect to building a state, a nation, a civil society, a democracy, and a market. The picture is *not* one of unmitigated disaster.

What little there was of a Weberian state in Ukraine in late 1991 has, since then, been supplemented with elements of stateness that bode relatively well for the future. In contrast to Russia, the Ukrainian Presidency and Parliament are becoming institutions, and not mere arenas of (armed) struggle. Some ministries, especially those concerned with foreign affairs, are becoming competent. Some elites, especially those with extended training in Western educational institutions or in several newly established Ukrainian institutes, are acquiring badly needed expertise in administration and policy making. And even the most ignorant administrators are presumably learning something about running a state. The army appears to be a more or less coherent fighting force more or less dedicated to defending Ukraine. Last but not least, the sym-

bolic accoutrements of statehood—international recognition, hymns, flags—appear to have become natural and normal.

Similar gains can be claimed on the nation-building front. Although Russian doubts about the wisdom of Ukrainian independence may have grown, secessionist movements are nascent at best, and ethnic Russian identification with Ukraine as a homeland still appears to be strong. By the same token, an exclusivist Ukrainian nationalism is still confined to some marginal political groups and to parts of Western Ukraine. Although it is much too premature to claim that a coherent Ukrainian nation has come into being, a *narod Ukrainy* may already exist, especially if the willingness to communicate in both Russian and Ukrainian, the absence of ethnic tensions, and the continued nonpoliticization of ethnicity indicate the existence of such an entity.

Purveyors of Ukrainian collapse frequently suggest that, lured by the promise of economic prosperity in Russia, the ethnic Russians of the Donbas are likely to press for secession from Ukraine. Aside from the fact that secessionist movements the world over have been and still are notoriously unsuccessful, Donbas Russians would have to be completely irrational to embark on such a move. Their support of Ukrainian independence in late 1991 reflected the belief that life would be better in an independent Ukraine; in other words, their commitment to "Russianness" and Mother Russia as an ethnic homeland appears to be minimal. If so, then, for them, life in Ukraine will continue to be infinitely better than life in Russia. In energy-poor Ukraine, they have economic, political, and ethnic clout; in energy-rich Russia, they would be sacrificed to the interests of the more efficient Kuzbass, reduced to but one region in an enormous country, and have no ethnic card to play.

The Crimea is somewhat different, less because it would make more political, economic, or ethnic sense for its inhabitants to join Russia—consider that even in Yeltsin's Russia the Crimea would lose its putative sovereignty and enjoy far less genuine autonomy—and more because of the presence of the Black Sea Fleet. The Crimea's transformation into a Trans-Dniester republic is not implausible, but, civil war aside, its successful secession would still depend far more on Russia's willingness to absorb it—and thereby set a precedent for its own dismemberment—than on Ukraine's incapacity to prevent it. And in either case Ukraine as a state would survive.

Civil society may be doing best in independent Ukraine. Although it, too, is still in a nascent stage, the large and burgeoning number of autonomous nonstate organizations, groupings, and protoinstitutions is encouraging evidence of a civil society-in-becoming. The revival of churches, the multiplication of self-styled political parties, the emergence of numerous social, cultural, and ethnic organizations all portend the development of a public sphere that could act as a barrier between the citizenry and the state and as a breeding ground for further private political, social, and economic initiatives.

Democratization receives passing grades as well, especially when compared to the retrograde processes taking place in Russia, where the struggle between parliament and president has led to deinstitutionalization, the legitimation of violence as a means of political struggle, and the emergence of an all-powerful president with indisputably dictatorial inclinations. Democracy, after all, is about procedures, rules, and institutions—and not about democratic proclamations and intentions. Although the Ukrainian government has been deadlocked for most of 1992 and 1993—and that *has* impeded reform—deadlock does have one important redemptive feature: it is also a sign of growing institutionalization and of the recognition by political elites that balance of power is central to democratic politics. No less important is the ability by the Ukrainian parliament and president to agree peacefully on general elections in the first half of 1994. A new parliament and president may be just as deadlocked and economic reform may not move forward, but democracy, which also matters, will have been advanced.

Economic reform is the Achilles' heel of Ukraine. The karbovanets has collapsed, hyperinflation is ravaging the land, privatization, even of the service sector, is less than minimal, and a partial and perhaps temporary return to central planning has been decreed in late 1993. None of this is good news, of course, but it is catastrophic only if one assumes—in the spirit of vulgar Marxism and vulgar Marketeerism—that economics determines everything and that nothing else matters. I have no doubt that economics is important, but I have just as little doubt that states and nations and civil societies and democracies also matter, especially in posttotalitarian, postimperial circumstances.

But let us assume the worst—that the economic downturn continues unabated. What, then, lies in store for Ukraine as a state? Obviously, its ability to function as an effective and modern polity will be

impaired, but will it also collapse? The answer has to be "no." A parasitical bureaucracy might emerge, the military might seize power, class and ethnic tensions might accumulate, civil war might even become a reality—but, as Lebanon, Guatemala, Spain, and many other countries that experienced civil war suggest, Ukraine is likely to remain. It may become impoverished and devastated, but it will not just disappear.

Skeptics might argue that the experience of the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia suggests otherwise: some states do just disappear. Might Ukraine be next? Like them, it is in the throes of crisis; like them, it is, or was, socialist; like them, it is multinational. But these comparisons conceal the truly important differences: namely, unlike them, Ukraine lacks a federal structure inspired by Stalin's views on the nationality question and that, unlike them, it is already developing nascent political, social, national, and cultural institutions that might help it weather the current storm. If these differences make a difference, then Russia's fate as a coherent state may be rather more in doubt than Ukraine's: its political institutions are in complete disarray, while its federal structure bodes no end of trouble for the center in Moscow.

One final point. Such catastrophic scenarios are premised on a view of Ukrainian elites as being so irrational as to be incapable of adopting reform even when their own survival is on the line. Surely such an assumption is exaggerated. Ukrainian elites may be incompetent, but they are not so blind as to be congenitally incapable of understanding that, at some point, there really may be no alternative to a more stringent monetary policy.

Prospects for the Future

A comparison with the state-building efforts of 1917-1921 is appropriate. Then, a handful of intellectuals tried to take control of a state apparatus, slap together an army, arouse a largely indifferent peasantry, survive a hostile international environment, fight back a determined ideological foe, and find a place in a chaotic postimperial Europe. As bad as things are at present, they are immeasurably better than they were then. Ukraine's numerous elites may have little experience running states, but they have had seventy years' experience of administering things. Ukraine has inherited a substantial chunk of the Soviet army and its equipment. Ukraine's leaders can draw on substantial segments of an urban, educated, and skilled population for support. Ukraine has been recognized by all the major powers, including Russia, and it holds seats in most of the major international organizations. Russia's policy makers may adopt enlightened imperialist policies, but even the most hard-core Russian imperialists lack the elan of the Bolsheviks. Most important perhaps, while the presence or absence of Ukraine did not matter to post-World War I Europe, which was busy redefining itself on the ruins of the Hohenzolern, Habsburg, and Romanov empires, it does matter to the stability and security of contemporary Europe. The end of Ukraine means the reassertion of a great power Russia and, as I intimated above, the beginning of a new Cold War.

Ukraine, then, will survive 1994—and 1995 and 1996 and many years thereafter. It may not be a place where most Western Europeans or North Americans might want to live, but it is unlikely to fare much better or much worse than most of the Soviet successor states. For a country emerging from the devastation of imperial and totalitarian rule, that is no mean feat.

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