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**MYKOLA RIABCHUK**

# Two worlds and Big Brother

**Historical differences and the threat of Moscow are used by politicians to manipulate the population and retain their power**

When I came to the West for the first time, in 1990, I had serious trouble explaining to my hosts where I was from. I considered myself Ukrainian; my passport even had an entry to that effect. Officially, there was such a thing as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic with its own government, parliament and membership of the UN. So I'd say firmly: 'I'm from Ukraine.'

My interlocutors were unimpressed. 'Sorry?' the more polite ones asked. 'What?' others said, straining their erudition to its limits, 'Bahrain?' 'No,' I'd reply. 'U-krain.'

'What's that?'

'A republic of the Soviet Union.'

'Oh, Russia!' Americans would nod, happily. 'No!' I tried hard to be patient. 'Russia is also part of the Soviet Union.' The Americans were baffled. How could Russia be part of Russia?

Finally, I met someone who was unfazed by my explanation. On the contrary, he reacted like a professional:

'Which Ukraine? Russian or Polish?'

It was my turn to feel taken aback.

'Soviet,' I muttered. 'For the time being.'

Anyone who has travelled to both western and eastern Ukraine – Lviv and Donetsk, for example – will confirm that they seem to belong to different civilisations. Easterners and westerners speak different languages (Russian and Ukrainian), they vote differently, attend different Orthodox churches (in the east, religion is altogether weaker), adopt different cultural attitudes, and see the past and future of the country in a different way.



*Lwów, Poland (now Lviv, Ukraine), 1936:  
children working as station porters. Credit: Sikorsky Museum*

The confrontation between the two Ukraines is dramatic, for it is hard to reconcile Soviet and anti-Soviet historical narratives, or any notion of entry into the European Union, with the prospect of integration with the Russian-Belarusian Union. It is difficult to think in terms of a Ukrainian linguistic and cultural revival while accepting its marginalisation by the Russian language and Russian culture.

But this confrontation is ideological: the two Ukraines are abstractions rather than opposing geopolitical realities. It is easily said that Lviv represents one Ukraine and Donetsk another. But it is almost impossible to identify where one Ukraine ends and the other begins.

The further east and south you go the sparser the vestiges of 'Polish' Ukraine: the Catholic churches, the castles disappear. There are fewer

Orthodox churches too, and Ukrainian is less often spoken. This paradoxical link between Ukrainian and Polish culture (paradoxical because historically Poland never promoted either the Orthodox Church or Ukrainian culture and language) has led historian Yaroslav Hrycak to remark that Ukrainian national identity developed most fully in regions longest under the Polish partition – Galitsia or Volhynia, for example.

In the east, Russian Ukraine dominates – in a monstrously Sovietised form. The Donbas region has the highest number of murders, robberies, suicides, abortions, cases of VD, and the greatest drugs and alcohol problem in the country. Further west, the signs of Sovietisation diminish: fewer Stalinist blocks, fewer monuments to Lenin and streets named after him, decreased industrial pollution and less of the Russian language.

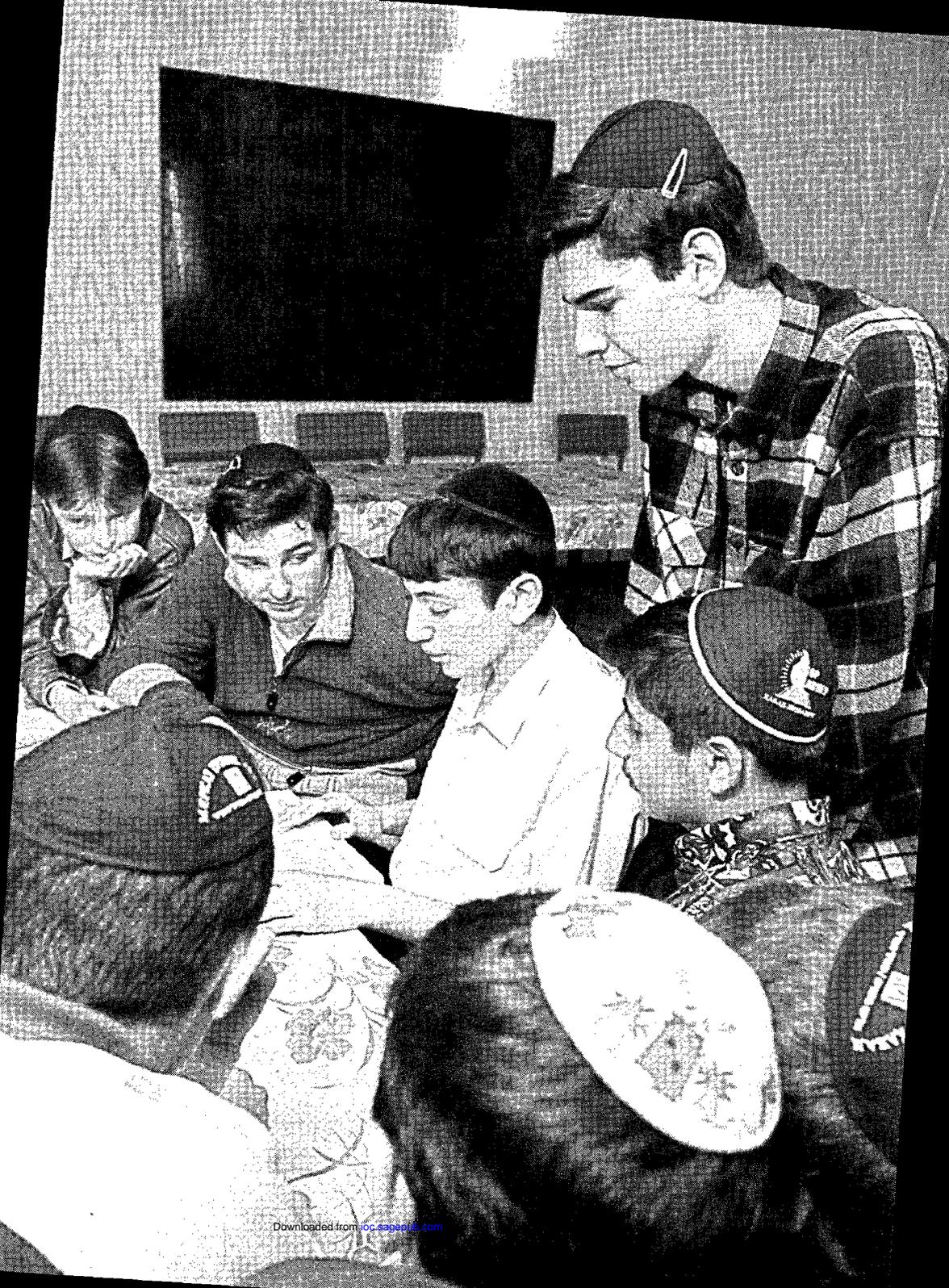
But even as far west as Lviv, Russian Ukraine makes its presence felt: Russian newspapers and books are sold everywhere for peanuts, low-grade Russian pop shrieks in cafés, and the business elite – like the criminal elite with which they are closely linked – tends to speak Russian, the language of the *nomenklatura* (members of the Soviet Communist Party, the Komsomol and the KGB) from which most new Ukrainians hail.

In Donetsk, the leading town in the east, it is considerably harder to see signs of the other, Ukrainian Ukraine. Its representatives live in the provinces and do not hold decent jobs in towns because a career used to be linked with compulsory Russification. They live in *kolkhoz* ghettos, supplying guest workers to big cities.

‘Things have improved, though,’ Ukrainian activist Volodymyr Bondarenko says. ‘We’ve opened a few Ukrainian schools [ten years ago there were none in Donetsk, a city with a population of 1.5 million] and classes are full. We are fighting to found our own newspapers and bookshops.’ Don’t the authorities help? ‘Not much, but at least they don’t stand in the way any more.’

Many Ukrainians feel this is one of the greatest achievements of the past decade. For the first time, they have their own state, which does not prevent them from sending their children to Ukrainian schools and does not persecute the Ukrainian language.

*Donetsk: a class for young Jews in the recently opened synagogue. Credit: Tim Smith*



The metaphor of the two Ukraines points to the geographical and ideological polarities symbolised by Lviv and Donetsk. At one extremity is Ukrainian, European Ukraine, looking to join NATO and the EU. At the other is Soviet, Eurasian Ukraine seeking union with the eastern Slavs, similar to Lukashenko's Belarus. The metaphor goes a long way to clarify the choice Ukraine has been trying and failing to make over the past decade.

During Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the more pragmatic sector of the *nomenklatura* took power here. In order to overcome their conservative rivals in the Party, and legitimise their own liberation from Russia, the *nomenklatura* made a tactical alliance with the opposition national democrats. The democrats were to take responsibility for the anthem, the flag and the ideology of the new state, including culture and education. The *nomenklatura* dealt with matters more concrete: privatisation, the transport of oil and gas from Russia, financial speculation. This transformed it quickly from a political class to a political-cum-business class: no longer *nomenklatura* but oligarchy.

Arguments over whether the democratic opposition could have done anything to prevent this continue to this day. Rukh (the largest opposition group) did not have enough support to take power and introduce radical political and economic change. It had the support of just 30% of the population which had voted for a non-communist, non-*nomenklatura* president in 1991. But over 60% supported Kravchuk – a sign that for Russian, bilingual Ukrainians, Vyacheslav Chornovil and Rukh were less a 'democratic' opposition than a nationalist one.

A tactical alliance between the *nomenklatura* and the national democrats was a necessity. Yet no political coalition or multiparty system developed. Over the past ten years, *nomenklatura* clans have been ruling the country fronted by former opposition leaders, compromising any idea of independence, democracy and market reform.

This unofficial 'ruling party' quickly sensed the weakness of its allies – their paranoid fear of selling out again to Russia. Moscow is a magic word that acts on Ukrainian democrats like nerve gas. 'Mind we don't capsize the boat,' the president's men say on all TV channels. Democrats agree: better these rulers than none. Better this president than a Russian one. It's hard to say how much real anxiety there is in this posture and how far it is an excuse for morally ambivalent collaboration with the regime.

The authoritarian system which broke down as the USSR collapsed

revived in the second half of the 1990s throughout the post-Soviet space. Local councils, even at the highest level, are decorative. Real power lies with the presidential office and regional administrations under its control. These play a role similar to former Communist Party committees. Neither Ukraine nor Russia, let alone the central Asian states, functions by the rule of law. A phone call from the presidential office – as from the Central Committee under communism – carries more weight than the decision of any court. Hence the political and economic problems these countries face.

Robert DeLossa of the Ukrainian Institute at Harvard has dubbed this the ‘blackmail state’. Everyone has to break the law to survive. Entrepreneurs evade tax because they cannot pay, tradespeople bribe the militia in public, workers produce things on the black and ordinary people go for years without paying for gas, electricity, water and heating because they can barely survive on what they earn. The ‘blackmail state’ serenely ignores these and other trivial (or indeed less trivial) offences. This lasts for as long as you stay loyal to the regime. Any attempt to rebel is punished instantly – in a way that is legal and formally vindicated.

The fate of the former Ukrainian prime minister, Pavlo Lazarenko, can serve to illustrate this. Over the years, Lazarenko had made a fortune worth millions. He also had the ear of the president, even though the parliamentary commission on organised crime had told Kuchma that Lazarenko’s interests were suspect. In 1997, the businessman turned prime minister was careless enough to say that in two years’ time he would be standing for the presidency. He lost his job instantly and for the past three years has been awaiting trial in a US jail on charges including money laundering.

Lazarenko’s story, and particularly the ruthless destruction of his media empire, was a prologue to the equally brutal presidential campaign of 1999. Regrettably, international organisations were silent. This encouraged the authorities to organise a farcical referendum on changes to the constitution intended to strengthen the president’s authoritarian powers. The Council of Europe condemned this charade, however, and the Ukrainian parliament refused to accept the changes proposed by the president.

Kuchma’s administration was further compromised by publicity surrounding tape-recorded conversations allegedly between the president and his closest associates on the ‘removal’ of a troublesome journalist,

Georgy Gongadze, later found dead. Despite the outrageous content of these tapes – viewed by most people as authentic – neither the communist left nor the national democrats demanded the president's dismissal.

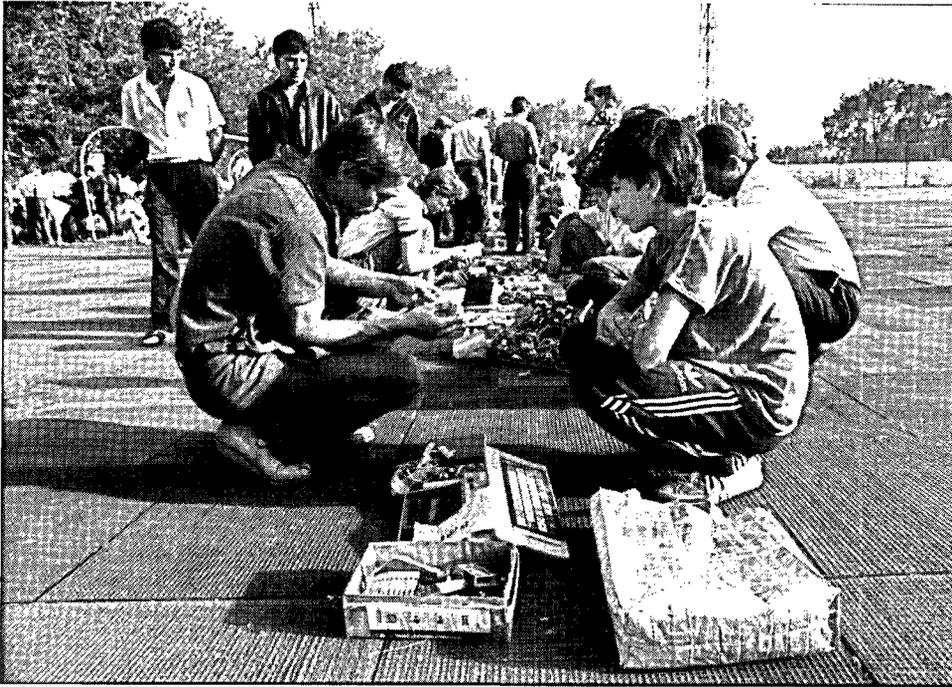
His unpopular regime survived the scandal with few losses, much as two years ago the president – who is equally unpopular – won an election simply by eliminating his opponents. The 'ruling party' manipulates the electoral sympathies of the two Ukraines and promotes itself as the lesser evil in both regions. Neither the pro-Soviet left nor the pro-western right have much liking for Kuchma and his oligarchy, but they like each other even less and fear that the other side might use Kuchma's fall to advantage.

Opinion polls show that about one-quarter of the Ukrainian population supports a Ukrainian, European Ukraine. About one-third supports the idea of a Soviet Eurasian Ukraine. The rest, a little less than half the population, say they don't know, are not interested or haven't decided. They may talk about integration with Europe together with Russia, about the free market with every conceivable guarantee of social welfare, about the revival of Ukrainian language and culture alongside continuing Russian cultural and linguistic domination. Some observers see this as post-Soviet schizophrenia, the symptom of a public consciousness traumatised by totalitarianism; others as a comic leap from a pre-modern to a post-modern age.

Ukraine's future rests with this third, undecided sector of the country, manipulated by the 'ruling party'. This silent, politically invisible, apparently absent part of Ukraine is the main political standby of the governing oligarchy, and a 'cold civil war' is being fought over it.

The party is happy with the status quo. It needs the two Ukraines in order to appear to be mediating between them in the eyes of its own citizens and of the world. But more than that, it needs the third, undecided Ukraine because that is its electorate, its way to quasi-democratic legitimacy. That is why it tries to ensure that people remain apathetic, ignorant, indifferent and fearful of any social instability. That is why the press and television controlled by the regime promotes conformism and relativism of the most cynical kind.

'I'm no angel,' the president says, by way of justifying his penchant for talking dirty. The media faithfully pick up the theme: 'Who is an angel? And who would replace him? That appalling communist? That



*Dnepropetrovsk, former site of a Soviet space and missile project: street swap-shop for scarce electronic parts.  
Credit: Michael J O'Brien / Panos Pictures*

mad nationalist? You want anarchy? You want civil war?' Of course not. Nobody does. Better not rock the boat, it's none too steady anyway. Who knows, the next president might well be worse.

There are factors, however, which will prevent Ukraine from stagnating completely under this regime. Reforms, though inconsistent, have created conditions for entrepreneurial initiatives and given people economic independence. The education system has changed, as has the lifestyle of many Ukrainians. Society is more open, better informed and looks increasingly to western ways. Civic organisations including independent media, though confined to larger cities, are growing despite attempts by the authorities to bribe, marginalise or destroy them.

The oligarchic ruling party is not as monolithic as the Communist Party used to be. It is made up of competing clans. Beside coteries building capital from the re-export of Russian oil and gas, or engaged in

shady financial transactions, there are new groups making money on the production of industrial or consumer goods. The flow of capital from Ukraine to banks on exotic islands has decreased, thanks to the policies of Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko and to action against money laundering taken by western governments. This has encouraged the ruling class to invest in Ukraine.

*Nolens volens*, Ukraine is in Europe and too close to the borders of first world countries to be ignored. The West continues to overestimate the readiness of Ukrainian elites to submit to Moscow, as well as the capability of present-day Russia to take control of such a vast and complicated country. But it also underestimates the importance of contacts with the West for Ukrainian elites: the possibility of holding money in western banks, taking holidays in prestigious resorts, sending their children to the best universities and so on. The *nomenklatura* and the oligarchs did not restructure the country and bid farewell to the empire and communism to be stuck in their own gilded cage.

The West does not have to give way to Kyiv's threats of closer ties with Moscow, made as soon as embarrassing issues such as human rights, free elections or the media are raised. But it can and should introduce more effective control of monetary transactions and a more active visa policy refusing entry to politicians and businessmen suspected of corruption. As long as a visa to EU countries is a problem for a journalist or an academic but not for post-Soviet gangsters, discussions on western aid hardly look serious.

Ukraine needs help, but it is important to understand which of the two Ukraines deserves it more. A weak civil society, swamped by economic chaos and political violence? Or a corrupt authoritarian state concealing the old Soviet system under the insignia of democracy and the free market? □

*Mykola Riabchuk is a Ukrainian writer and journalist, the deputy editor-in-chief of Krytyka magazine in Kyiv. In the 1970s he was a samizdat author and activist. One of his short stories of that period was published in Index on Censorship in 1991. Currently he is researching the post-Soviet mass media at the Institut fuer die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna.*

*Translated by Irena Maryniak from Tygodnik Powszechny (Poland), 2 September 2001*