

Ukraine, The (Former) Center, Russia, and “Russia”

In Ukraine, as in the other former Soviet republics, the failed August, 1991, putsch resulted in a sudden and dramatic change in the political situation. On August 24, 1991, the Supreme Soviet in Kiev proclaimed Ukraine an independent state subject to a referendum on December 1, 1991. The communist party was first suspended and then banned altogether on the basis of evidence that its leadership supported the putschists in Moscow. Several days later, the communist-dominated majority in the Supreme Soviet dissolved itself, shifting the balance of power to the democratic forces which, although often divided over tactics, have been united on the fundamental question of full independence and statehood. The Ukrainian referendum yielded an astounding 90.32 per cent vote in favor of independence, thereby sealing the fate of the Soviet Union. The new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was formed in December and is seen by many as the successor state to the Soviet Union, remains an unknown quantity. As *Literaturnaya gazeta* commented in its first issue for 1992, the CIS leaders are beginning to realize that thus far the Commonwealth does not even exist on paper. The resignation of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, argues the writers' weekly, in no way signifies the destruction of the center, but rather “the transfer of the idea of central power into other heads.” The key issue, it continues, is the Ukrainian–Russian relationship. This is a polite way of saying that Russia has yet to come to terms with the loss of empire and that Ukraine, as in the past, continues to play a pre-eminent role in the search for Russia's identity.

The Ukrainian–Russian Nexus

Among the factors that have distinguished Ukraine from the other former republics is its size, economic potential, and geopolitical position. With a population of nearly 52 million, it is the second largest of the former republics after the RSFSR. Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, has almost double the population of all of Estonia and equals that of Latvia, while Donetsk, one of the 25 oblasts, is considerably larger than Lithuania. The Ukrainian economy, ranked highest in a recent Deutsche Bank study of former republics,² accounts for about one-fifth of the Soviet gross national income. Moreover, Ukraine occupied a strategic geopolitical position in the Soviet West that provided the Soviet Union with a “European” identity. In short, without

1. “Sodruzhestvo Nezavisimikh Gosudarstv,” *Literaturnaya gazeta*, January 1, 1992.

2. Jürgen Corbet and Andreas Gummich, *The Soviet Union at the Crossroads: Facts and Figures on the Soviet Republics* (Frankfurt: Deutsche Bank AG, Economics Department, 1990), p. 11.

Ukraine it is difficult to imagine a viable union of Soviet successor states in any shape or form: federated, confederated, or a commonwealth. This was reaffirmed by Gorbachev, who told television viewers in October, 1991, that "Ukraine is an irreplaceable factor in the building of our Union." "I cannot think of a Union without Ukraine," he said. "I cannot think of it and I cannot imagine it."³ This was also the gist of a special appeal to the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet to remain in the Soviet Union signed by Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and the leaders of seven other former Soviet republics at the opening of the revamped USSR Supreme Soviet on October 21, which was boycotted by Kiev.⁴

But there is another and arguably more important dimension to the "Ukrainian question." This is a historic or perhaps psychological dimension that has been conditioned by the specific nature of Ukrainian-Russian relations over the centuries and the equally unique Russian view of what constitutes Russia and the Russian people (*narod*). The result has been that traditionally Russian public opinion, regardless of its political orientation, has found it inordinately difficult to imagine Ukraine existing outside of the Russian context. Historically, mainstream Russian political thought has considered Ukraine to be "Little Russia" and Ukrainian as an offshoot of a larger all-Russian (*obshcherusskii*) nation that also incorporates the Belorussians. In this context, to "lose" Ukraine is tantamount to losing an important part of Russian history and, consequently, identity. This Russian "Ukrainian complex" was clearly spelled out by Petr Struve, one of the central figures in Russian liberal democracy in the decades before the Bolshevik revolution, who wrote in 1912:

I am deeply convinced that, alongside all-Russian (*obshcherusskaya*) culture and the all-Russian language, Little Russian (*malorusskaya*), or Ukrainian, culture is a local or regional culture. This position of the "Little Russian" culture and the "Little Russian" language has been determined by the entire course of the historical development of Russia and can be changed only by the total demolition not only of the historically developed structure of Russian statehood but of Russian society as well.⁵

For Struve, the idea of Ukraine was anti-historical and posed the threat of "a gigantic and unprecedented schism of the Russian nation." Similarly, the eminent Russian philosopher Georgii Fedotov understood that for Russians the Ukrainian question is in essence a question of Russian national consciousness. Its solution, he argued, dictates whether that consciousness remains all-Russian or splits off into its ethnic Russian (Great Russian) and Ukrainian components, which he felt would be a national catastrophe. "The Ukrainian problem," wrote Fedotov in 1938, "has an infinitely more profound meaning for Russia than all other national problems. It is a question not only of the political structure of Russia and its boundaries, but of its spiritual life."⁶ Ivan Drach, the prominent poet and leader of the Ukrainian democratic opposition

3. TASS, October 13, 1991.

4. For the text, see *Radyanska Ukraina*, October 23, 1991.

5. Petr Struve, "Obshcherusskaya kultura i ukrainskii partikulyarizm. Otvet ukraintsu," *Russkaya mysl*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January 1912), p. 66. Struve was answered by Vladimir Zhabotinskii, one of the leading figures in the Zionist movement, in an article entitled "Struve i ukrainskii vopros" in *Odesskie vedomosti*, March 2, 1912. It was made available to Ukrainian readers along with other writings by Zhabotinskii on Ukrainian issues by the Kiev monthly *Dnipro* in its November-December 1991 issue.

6. G. P. Fedotov, "O Mazepe," in *Polnoe sobranie statei v shesti tomakh*, Vol. 4: *Zashchita Rossii. Stati 1936-1940 iz "Novoi Rossii"* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1988), p. 207. The article is also published in *Iskusstvo kino*, No. 8 (1990), pp. 35-37.

"Rukh" amusingly illustrates this point with his story of a Russian tourist from Tambov who, seeing Kiev for the first time and charmed by its beauty, asks in bewilderment: "But when did the Ukrainians steal all of this from us?"⁷

The central question implicit in Struve's and Fedotov's writings on Ukraine and in the bewilderment of our tourist from Tambov is: "What is Russia?" The question is by no means new. With the disintegration of the Soviet political and state system, however, it has assumed a measure of acuteness that is being felt not only in Moscow, Kiev, and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, but in the major Western capitals as well.

Already several years ago something interesting and very different began to happen in the Soviet Union insofar as the framework for discussion of Soviet politics was concerned. There developed, without anyone paying too much attention, a new lexicon that reflected the new political realities, i.e. the emergence of the "center" and the "republics." Admittedly, these two notions had existed in the past, but not as conceptual entities. There was clearly a center and there were republics, but neither had a political identity of its own. Rather, both categories functioned as a whole in the form of the mythological "single Soviet Union." The turning point came in May, 1990, when Yeltsin, addressing the inaugural Congress of RSFSR People's Deputies, pinpointed the "longstanding imperial policies of the center" as the source of all of the problems in the republics and, above all, in Russia.⁸ This view found wide support among the Russian lawmakers, who went on to declare the RSFSR a sovereign state. The non-Russian Union republics followed suit as did a number of autonomous formations within the RSFSR as well. Already then the well-known philosopher and political scientist Aleksandr Tsipko recognized that the Russian-led attack on the center threatened the dismemberment not only of the Soviet Union, but of Russia itself. Writing in *Izvestia*, Tsipko lectured the Russian deputies for failing to understand that Russia is in fact the Soviet Union, that "Russia's flight from Russia" is a contradiction in terms. "But Moscow cannot secede from Moscow," he insisted. "This is unnatural, it is madness."⁹ And what of the non-Russians, particularly the Ukrainians and Belorussians, asked Tsipko?

Many Russians have forgotten not only that they are Russians, but also that they are Slavs, that they are bound by one common fate to the Ukrainians and Belorussians, that they carry the main responsibility for the Slavs of Kievan Rus' . . . Some of the deputies, furiously pressing at the Congress for the complete sovereignty of Russia, have not taken into consideration what kind of response their separatist passions and moods will produce in the hearts, let's say, of the Ukrainians or Belorussians.

The Ukrainians, noted Tsipko, can make do by themselves no worse than the Russians. "But what will remain of the USSR if the Ukrainians and Belorussians

7. *Literaturnaya gazeta*, April 11, 1990. The relationship between history and national identity in the Ukrainian-Russian context is discussed by Kristian Gerner, "An Alternative to Moscow: Ancient Rus', Modern Ukraine and Byelorussia," in Alexander Bon and Robert van Voren, eds., *Nationalism in the USSR: Problems of Nationalities* (Amsterdam: Second World Center, 1989), pp. 68-86. For an analysis of the Ukrainian-Russian relationship past and present, see Roman Szporluk's chapters "The Ukraine and Russia," in Robert Conquest, ed., *The Last Empire: Nationality and the Soviet Future* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), pp. 151-182 and "The Imperial Legacy and the Soviet Nationalities Problems," in Lubomyr Hajda and Mark Beissinger, eds., *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 1-23.

8. *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, May 23, 1990.

9. *Izvestia*, May 26, 1990.

and, after them, the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and others begin thinking and acting like many people's deputies of Russia?"

Tsipko's article—entitled "Russians Withdrawing from Russia?"—touches on all of the issues reflected in the title of this essay. First, it indicates the degree to which, from the Russian standpoint, the Soviet Union and Russia are very often more or less interchangeable notions. Yurii Burtin, one of the leaders of the Democratic Russia Movement, described this syndrome as follows: "Here we cannot separate Russia from the center. We look back in history and the center is somehow ourselves."¹⁰ Second, it highlights a closely related issue, which could be described as the problem of Russia or "Russia," i.e. the contrasting and competing visions of Russia defined in modern ethno-national terms, as opposed to "Russia" defined as a political-ideological category. The former position has been identified with Yeltsin and his democratic supporters, although the Russian democratic movement is by no means a homogenous force and certainly not when it comes to the national question. This was brought home by the formal split in the Democratic Russia Movement at its second congress in November, 1991, where a major role was played by conflicting views on the question of the "unity and indivisibility of Russia." Nikolai Travkin, who took his Democratic Party of Russia out of the coalition along with the Russian Christian Democratic Movement and the Kadets, explained that the fundamental issues in the split were the future of the Soviet Union as a federation or confederation and the unity of Russia.¹¹ The idea of "Russia" as something greater and quite different from ethnic Russia was nicely summed up in *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, the standardbearer of Russian "patriotism": "Russia is not blood and it is not an ethnos—it is an IDEA."¹² Which of these conflicting identities eventually gains the upper hand will have far-reaching consequences not only for the Russians themselves, but for all of the peoples of the former Soviet Union. The outcome has yet to be decided and, by all accounts, there is still a considerable way to go. A recent survey concluded that the Russian public is "schizophrenic" about its national identity—43 per cent think of themselves as Russians and 42 per cent as Soviet. Among supporters of Yeltsin, however, 57 per cent identify Russia as their country.¹³ And finally, Tsipko, like Struve and Fedotov, is fully aware that any solution to the Russian national question immediately conjures up the Ukrainian national question.

The abortive coup in August brought all of these issues to a head much sooner than anyone expected. Its authors intended to block a Gorbachev-sponsored "renewal" of the Soviet empire, but succeeded instead in accelerating its collapse. Nonetheless, Gorbachev, undaunted, resumed what was commonly referred to as the Novo Ogarevo process of reanimating a new center. The coup plotters also appeared to have opened the way for the complete "normalization" of Russia, its final liberation from the center, or perhaps from itself, i.e. the resolution of the Russia—"Russia" dilemma. Very soon, however, it became clear that the question of where Russia is headed remains open, particularly in view of the fact that prominent Russian voices began to stake out Russia's claim as the rightful heir to the

10. Quoted by Esther Schrader, *Knight-Ridder Newspapers*, March 8, 1991.

11. *Izvestia*, November 11, 1991; *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1991.

12. *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, March 15, 1991 (capitals in the original).

13. Cited by Roman Szporluk, "The War Between Two Russias: Yeltsin and the New Awakening," *The Washington Post*, August 25, 1991.

former Soviet Union. And it is here that the Ukrainian question played a crucial role. As Tsipko recently wrote: "All it took was for the Ukrainians, and later the Belorussians and Kazakhs, to begin talking about their complete state independence for the faces of our Russian proponents of sovereignty (*suverenshchiki*) to somehow drop."¹⁴ In the current situation, argued Tsipko, the only solution is to hold a referendum as quickly as possible on the fate of the RSFSR. Either the RSFSR becomes an independent state or its leadership does everything in its power to promote the signing of a new Union treaty. But "under no circumstances can the RSFSR become a national state like Poland and the Baltic republics."¹⁵ Gleb Pavlovskii, writing in *Moskovskie novosti*, also sees Ukraine as having played a pivotal role in Russia's confrontation with itself. There are those, he says, who see the three days in August as the beginning of Russia's restoration; another viewpoint holds that it was then that, in a certain sense, Russian history came to an end. In any case, he continues, the final straw was Ukraine's declaration of independence, the "meaning of which is only slowly beginning to enter into the consciousness of the Russian-speaking elite."¹⁶

The Center: Problems of Identity

How did the former center see itself, what was its relationship to Russia and "Russia," and where did Ukraine fit in? The emergence of the center as an independent political actor required a new body of self-legitimizing ideas. With the old Soviet Union went the old ideas, i.e. the myths of a "single multinational Soviet state," a "single Soviet people," and a "single national economic complex." What took their place? If we examine the arguments in defense of the center that were advanced by its chief spokesman, Gorbachev, the following picture emerges. The center is the only guarantor of the preservation of the Soviet Union both in the geopolitical sense, i.e. as a major power that commands respect in the international arena, and in the sense that the Soviet Union is a unique product of history—in Gorbachev's words, a "unique civilization" and the "natural result of a historical process"—that must be preserved precisely because of its uniqueness. These themes were eloquently presented by the Soviet President in his February 6, 1991, television address urging all Soviet citizens to support a "renewed federation" in the March 17 referendum and in another television address on March 15, where he emphasized the "integrity of the thousand-year-old state."¹⁷ Given the fact that the immediate origins of the Soviet Union can be traced to October, 1917, and not to some point in the 9th century, the question emerges as to the extent of Gorbachev's identification of the Soviet Union with "Russia."

Already in June, 1985, during his first visit to Ukraine, Gorbachev twice referred to the Soviet Union as Russia. Apparently realizing his *faux pas*, he explained that "that is what we call it now."¹⁸ One could argue, of course, that not too much should be made of such slips of the tongue. On the other hand, they seem to have come easily for representatives of the center, as was the case with General Mikhail

14. *Izvestia*, October 1, 1991.

15. *Ibid.* See also the interviews with Tsipko in *Nedelya*, No. 40 (September 30–October 6, 1991) and *Literaturnaya gazeta*, November 6, 1991, which focus on the question of Russia's future.

16. *Moskovskie novosti*, November 3, 1991.

17. For the texts of the addresses, see *Pravda*, February 7, 1991 and March 16, 1991, respectively.

18. *Central Soviet Television*, June 25, 1985.

Moiseev, the former Deputy Minister of Defense and Chief of the General Staff, who came to Kiev at the end of 1990 to convince the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet that the interests of the "Russian state" (*gosudarstva rossiiskogo*) necessitated a centralized Soviet army.¹⁹ For further clarification we can turn to Gorbachev's response to a question about nationality problems at a meeting with delegates to the USSR Komsomol Congress in April, 1990. The Soviet leader pointed to the territorial issues that had emerged in the aftermath of Lithuania's declaration of independence the previous month. Specifically, he raised the question of the port city of Klaipeda, noting that it had been German for several centuries and was transferred to the Soviet Union after World War II. "This is the sea border," he explained, "towards which *Russia* advanced for centuries."²⁰ For the Soviet President, therefore, it would seem that the interests of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire were indistinguishable.

Equally interesting is Gorbachev's vision of "Russia," which he defined in June, 1990, in his address to the constituent congress of the communist party of the Russian republic. Declaring his "resolute opposition" to those seeking Russia's salvation by distancing the RSFSR from the center, he emphasized the "profound spiritual aspects" of Russia's connection to the USSR:

The profound truth of the matter is that Russia can be and is unique (*samobytnoi*) and great only by being surrounded and permeated by the life-giving force of [other] cultures and languages, by being tied to them and by enriching them and, conversely, being enriched by them. Tear apart this accretively rooted system and you will no longer have Russia at all—or certainly not that Russia that has been mandated to us and that we should solicitously hand down to our descendants. All of us Russians (*rossiyany*) ought seriously to think about this and remember it.²¹

Similarly, responding to a query from the floor of the USSR Supreme Soviet regarding his view of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's essay "How Shall We Reconstitute Russia?"²² Gorbachev, while characterizing the Nobel Prize laureate's attitude towards other nations as "disrespectful" and one that he could not agree with, added: "In each of us Russians (*russkie*) we have in our genes a vision of our country with all of its magnitude, vastness, and multitude of languages, cultures, and aspects. All of this is us, and we feel fine this country."²³

The essence of these reflections seems to be that Russia can only be "Russia," i.e. that a modern Russian state is "unnatural" and that "Russianness," or Russian national identity, is inconceivable outside the imperial context. For our purposes, it is particularly interesting to note that, in Gorbachev's view, both "Russia" and the Soviet Union have qualities of uniqueness. Presumably, these are identical, which is to say that "Russia" and the Soviet Union are indistinguishable concepts. This was reflected in a post-putsch interview with the Soviet leader that also focused on the crucial significance of Ukraine for the Soviet Union, i.e. for "Russia:"

19. *Literaturna Ukraina*, December 6, 1990.

20. *Pravda*, April 12, 1990 (emphasis added).

21. *Pravda*, June 20, 1990.

22. Solzhenitsyn's essay was published in the September 18, 1990 issues of *Literaturnaya gazeta* and *Komsomolskaya pravda*.

23. *Central Soviet Television*, "Vremya," September 25, 1990, and *TASS*, September 25, 1990. Interestingly, the reference to genes was omitted in the published version of Gorbachev's remarks in *Komsomolskaya pravda*, September 27, 1990.

There can be no Union without Ukraine, I feel, and no Ukraine without the Union. These Slavic states, Russia and Ukraine, were the axis along which, for centuries, events turned and a huge multinational state developed. That is the way it will remain. I am convinced of this.²⁴

The Center and Ukraine

Gorbachev, like the leadership of the RSFSR, began to take a heightened interest in Ukraine after its proclamation of independence. Before then, his main concern centered on maintaining a balancing act between the demands of the democratic opposition as represented by "Rukh" and the interests of the republic's communist party leadership. This was evident from his surprise visit to Ukraine in February, 1989, a time when the confrontation between "Rukh" and the conservative Ukrainian party leadership headed by Volodymyr Shcherbytskyi was about to emerge in full public view. In Kiev, where he met with Ukrainian writers, the General Secretary of the CPSU tried to strike a balance between these two forces, seeking assurances from the "Rukh" leaders that they did not intend to transform their reform movement into a political party.²⁵ At the same time, he did not directly criticize Shcherbytskyi, asking the writers to take into account the complexities of the situation. Interestingly, according to "Rukh" leader Drach, Gorbachev appealed to the writers for Slavic unity among the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian peoples.²⁶ The Soviet Party leader took a more strident tone in the heavily Russified city of Donetsk, where he warned of the consequences for the entire Soviet Union of a Nagorno Karabakh scenario in Ukraine.²⁷ In the autumn of 1989, Gorbachev came to Ukraine again, this time to ensure a smooth transition of power in the party after Shcherbytskyi's death.²⁸

Thereafter, as the Ukrainian opposition gained in strength and Ukrainian was officially recognized as the state language in the republic, Gorbachev began to show interest in the language question in Ukraine, particularly with respect to the Russian minority. During his visit to Lithuania in January, 1990, which was intended to persuade the Lithuanians to be "sensible," he warned a crowd in Vilnius:

You remember, as soon as they raised the question of the Russian language in Ukraine, it immediately affected the interests of many people. After all, there are 15 million Russians in Ukraine [sic]—all of the Donbass is Russian [sic], Kharkiv is Russian [sic], Russians are 66 per cent in Crimea. As you can see, it is not enough to throw out a slogan, it has to be thought out.²⁹

Similarly, addressing the USSR Komsomol Congress several months later, Gorbachev told the delegates:

When certain public movements in Ukraine posed the question of the Russian language in Ukraine in a way that did not correspond to the interests of either the Ukrainians or Russians or of people of other nationalities there, in Crimea

24. *Molod Ukrainy*, August 30, 1991.

25. See Dmytro Pavlychko's address to the April, 1989 meeting of Kiev writers in *Literaturna Ukraina*, May 4, 1989.

26. *AP*, February 24, 1989.

27. *Pravda*, February 24, 1989.

28. See Roman Solchanyk, "Ukrainian Party Plenum Emphasizes Continuity," *Report on the USSR*, No. 42 (October 20, 1989), pp. 17-19.

29. *Pravda*, January 12, 1990.

they began to gather signatures for its return to Russia; they gathered half a million and then stopped, because a correct solution was found. The same thing in the Donbass, in the east of Ukraine, where there are 11 million Russians.³⁰

Such attempts to cast the Russians in Ukraine in the role of a potential fifth column by raising the specter of "forcible Ukrainianization" in places like Crimea, where there is not a single Ukrainian-language school for the more than half million Ukrainians there,³¹ may appear ludicrous. Nonetheless, the growth of centrifugal tendencies in the heavily Russian and Russified eastern and southern regions of Ukraine is indisputable, especially after Ukraine proclaimed its sovereignty in July, 1990, and all the more so after the declaration of independence. The democratic opposition and the authorities in Kiev have been careful to reassure the Russian and Russian-speaking population that Ukrainian independence poses no threat. Thus, in an article in *Pravda* in July, 1991, Chairman of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet Leonid Kravchuk responded directly to this challenge:

I want to point out that the Russians in Ukraine should not be compared with the Russians in the Baltic republics. Here they are indigenous residents, they have lived on this land for hundreds of years . . . And we will not permit any kind of discrimination against them. The Russian-language card should not be played. This is a dangerous game . . . Our republic, pardon me for saying so, is not Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, or Moldova.³²

Kravchuk's arguments had little noticeable effect. Besides Crimea, the movement for autonomy and, in some cases, secession from Ukraine gained momentum in the Donbass as well. Its chief spokesman is Viktor Honcharov, a former USSR people's deputy from Enakievo in the Donetsk region, who stirred a major controversy in Ukraine after his speech to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies in September, 1991, claiming that Ukraine's declaration of independence was "unconstitutional" and that the "national separatist mass" had effectively taken over the Supreme Soviet in Kiev. Afterwards, Honcharov was given prime time on central Soviet television on two occasions, where he reiterated his arguments against Ukrainian independence, resulting in a formal protest from Ukrainian writers to Egor Yakovlev, head of the all-Union Teleradio Company and formerly the chief editor of the liberal weekly *Moskovskie novosti*.³³ The response of the authorities in Kiev has been to pursue a policy of accommodation towards national minorities coupled with determination to prevent the dismemberment of Ukraine. On November 1, 1991, the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet adopted a "Declaration of the Rights of Nationalities of Ukraine," which among other postulates, allows for the functioning of the language of any national group that is compactly settled in an administrative-territorial unit "on the same level" as the state language, i.e. Ukrainian.³⁴ Somewhat earlier, the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet passed legislation revising the Criminal Code

30. *Pravda*, April 12, 1990.

31. *Literaturna Ukraina*, November 7, 1991.

32. *Pravda*, July 16, 1991.

33. The text of Honcharov's speech is published in *Izvestia*, September 5, 1991. See also his interview in *Komsomolskoe znaniya*, September 6, 1991 and his article "Opomnites, slavyane!" in *Rabochaya tribuna*, October 1, 1991. For the text of the open letter to Yakovlev, see *Pravda Ukrainy*, October 31, 1991.

34. For the text, see *Radyanska Ukraina*, November 5, 1991. Shortly before, the newly created Committee on Nationalities Matters of the Cabinet of Ministers issued a statement guaranteeing the rights of all nationalities. For the text, see *Demokratychna Ukraina*, October 23, 1991.

to make "appeals and other activities aimed at the violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine" a criminal offense.³⁵ This step may well have been taken to discourage initiatives similar to the one taken by Solzhenitsyn in early October, who proposed in a Moscow newspaper that the results of the December 1 referendum in Ukraine be tallied not in sum, but rather on an oblast by oblast basis so that each oblast could decide for itself "where it belongs."³⁶ On the eve of the referendum, Kravchuk appeared on Soviet central television and harshly criticized the mass media in Moscow for consciously attempting to enflame Ukrainian-Russian hostilities. In the process, he accused Gorbachev of idly standing by in spite of the fact that he had personally urged the Soviet President to intervene.³⁷

Even before the declaration of independence Ukraine's relations with the center, although not confrontational, were becoming increasingly strained. Ukraine's position, as voiced by Kravchuk and the Supreme Soviet, was straightforward and consistent: any future arrangement with the Kremlin concerning a new Union treaty must be in line with the republic's sovereignty declaration. In this connection, Kravchuk did not hesitate to criticize Gorbachev openly:

The President, when he issues his decrees, forgets that there is our declaration, that there is a republic, that there is a road to sovereignty, that now this is not merely a slogan, that it is entering into the consciousness and psychology of the people. And no one can change this now, regardless of how much they would like to.³⁸

On various occasions, the Ukrainian leader expressed his dissatisfaction with the drafts of the new Union treaty proposed by the center. Specifically, with regard to the draft published in March, 1991, Kravchuk said that he had objections to "practically every paragraph" of that document, all of which were published in the Ukrainian press.³⁹

The Ukrainian position was strengthened by the results of the March 17 referendum in the republic. Although 70.2 per cent of the voters in Ukraine agreed that the USSR should be preserved, 80.2 per cent also said yes to a second question that appeared on the Ukrainian ballots: "Do you agree that Ukraine should be part of a Union of Soviet sovereign states on the principles of the declaration of state sovereignty of Ukraine?"⁴⁰ From that point onward, Kravchuk used the referendum vote to strengthen his position *vis-à-vis* the center. Thus, it is perhaps not entirely fortuitous that when the 9+1 agreement with Gorbachev was being negotiated in Novo Ogarevo in April, 1991, the Ukrainian leader was on an official visit to Germany. After returning to Kiev, he told a press conference that "this statement has no juridical force." The positive aspect, added Kravchuk, was that "finally there is agreement that the Union will be a union of sovereign states, that the center of economic and political life should be transferred to the republics."⁴¹ But probably the clearest indication of Ukraine's hard-line position in the pre-independence

35. *Izvestia*, October 12, 1991. For the text, see *Silski visti*, October 31, 1991.

36. Solzhenitsyn's appeal was published in *Trud*, October 8, 1991.

37. *Central Soviet Television*, "Aktualnoe intervyyu," November 17, 1991.

38. *Za vilnu Ukrainu*, March 5, 1991.

39. *Holos Ukrainy*, April 3, 1991. Kravchuk's remarks and proposals were published in *Holos Ukrainy*, March 31, 1991.

40. The results, including by oblast and in the capital, are published in *Radyanska Ukraina*, March 23, 1991.

41. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, May 5, 1991.

period came at the end of June. Gorbachev, it will be recalled, wanted the new Union treaty signed by mid-July in order to present the leaders of the G7 industrial nations in London with at least a semblance of unity. In the course of one day, June 27, the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet dashed these hopes by voting overwhelmingly to postpone all discussion of the draft treaty until after September 15, 1991. When asked by a journalist what kind of reaction could be expected from the center, Kravchuk responded laconically: "As a rule, a girl marries the one she loves; otherwise she looks for another fiance."⁴²

In the aftermath of the abortive coup and the declaration of independence, Ukraine's official position was that it would participate in all inter-republican structures as long as they are temporary and created by the former republics themselves. Economic and military strategic ties among the former republics should be maintained, it was argued, but the reanimation of any Union structures, according to Kravchuk, was "out of the question."⁴³ Addressing the extraordinary session of the Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow in September, Kravchuk maintained that Ukraine would not participate in any discussions about a new Union treaty until after December 1 and that, in any case, the discussion now could only be in terms of confederation.⁴⁴ Clearly, much of this can be attributed to political posturing with a view towards the presidential elections, which were also scheduled for December 1, 1991.⁴⁵ At the same time, there is little doubt that the pressure to implement the independence declaration was being felt by the Ukrainian lawmakers. This was reflected in the unusually swift enactment of a package of legislation at the end of October designed to establish Ukraine's own military force and the Supreme Soviet's insistence on having a voice in matters concerning the formidable nuclear arsenal located on Ukrainian territory. This move sent shock waves not only through the Kremlin and Yeltsin's White House, but through the Western capitals as well. Official Washington, it was reported, was thrown into a state of confusion as to its "Ukrainian policy."⁴⁶ In the meantime, Ukraine continued to confront the Kremlin. It first boycotted and then only initialed the economic cooperation agreement worked out by Grigorii Yavlinskii, making its final adherence subject to ratification by the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet. Further, Ukrainian deputies skipped the opening session of the revamped USSR Supreme Soviet on October 21; later it was decided to send representatives with only observer status, limiting their participation to one of the chambers, the Council of the Republics. Finally, when Gorbachev summoned the State Council to Novo Ogarevo on November 14 to resume working on the new Union treaty, Ukraine was conspicuously absent. Almost as an aside, Kravchuk remarked on central Soviet television that the treaty "has no future."⁴⁷ Ukraine was absent again at the meeting of the State Council on November 25, at which Gorbachev assumed that the Union treaty would be initialed. On the eve of the Ukrainian referendum and presidential vote, Kravchuk flatly declared that Ukraine was not interested in a confederation and that he was removing himself completely from the Novo Ogarevo process.

42. *Kultura i zhyttya*, July 13, 1991.

43. *Radio Kiev*, September 3, 1991.

44. *TASS*, September 2, 1991.

45. Kravchuk gained 61.59 per cent of the vote. His nearest competitor, former political prisoner and chairman of the Lviv Oblast Council in Western Ukraine, Vyacheslav Chornovil, won 23.27 per cent.

46. See the excellent report by Mark Matthews in *The Sun* (Baltimore), November 17, 1991.

47. *Central Soviet Television*, "Informatsionnaya programma," November 15, 1991.

Forging a New Ukrainian–Russian Relationship

In spite of past difficulties, Ukrainian–Russian relations, particularly after Yeltsin assumed leadership of the Russian republic, were developing normally. There are 11.3 million Russians in Ukraine constituting almost 22 per cent of the population, but there is little indication of a "Russian problem" in Ukraine comparable to the situation in the Baltic states and Moldova. Leading figures in the Ukrainian government and administration—the Prime Minister (Vitold Fokin), the Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Soviet (Vladimir Grinev), the Minister of Defense (General Konstantin Morozov), and the Prosecutor General (Viktor Shishkin)—are all ethnic Russians. Russians in Ukraine do not show a great desire to "emigrate" to the RSFSR. Even in Western Ukraine, where Ukraine national sentiment is firmly entrenched and where anti-Russian attitudes might be expected to be strongest, a poll conducted at the end of 1990 among the local Russian population showed that 44 per cent had no intention of leaving (and another 31 per cent had difficulty giving a definitive answer).⁴⁸

The policy of accommodation and cooperation with regard to the Russian minority in Ukraine has also been mirrored in inter-republican relations. In August, 1990, representatives of the Ukrainian parliamentary opposition grouped in the *Narodna Rada* (People's Council) and their Russian counterparts from the Democratic Russia bloc signed a "Declaration of the Principles of Inter-State Relations between Ukraine and the RSFSR Based on the Declarations of State Sovereignty." The document noted that the growth of democratic movements in the two republics offered the Ukrainian and Russian peoples "a real chance to open a new page in the history of their relations."⁴⁹ It also served as the basis for a formal treaty between the two republics on November 19, 1990, which recognized each other's sovereignty and the inviolability of their borders.⁵⁰ Many observers saw this as a turning point in the centuries old relationship between Ukraine and Russia. Yeltsin, who came to Kiev for the signing of the treaty, emphasized that in so doing he wanted to demonstrate that, unlike previous arrangements that were concluded in Moscow on unequal terms, "we very much wanted to sign this one in Kiev."⁵¹ The gesture was intended to underline a fundamental change in relations between the two nations. Addressing the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet, the Russian leader announced another fundamental change, i.e. a reassessment of Russia's self-image:

I categorically reject the accusation that Russia is now claiming some special role. At the [Supreme Soviet] session, [Nikolai] Ryzhkov said that we allegedly want to shift the center from the center to somewhere in Russia. I categorically reject this accusation. Russia does not aspire to become the center of some sort of new empire. It does not want to have an advantage over other republics. Russia understands better than others the perniciousness of that role, inasmuch as it was Russia that performed precisely that role for a long time. What did it gain from this? Did Russians become more free as a result? Better off? Happier? You yourselves know the truth; history has taught us that a people that rules over others cannot be fortunate.⁵²

48. *Moskovskie novosti*, January 27, 1991.

49. For the text, see *Literaturna Ukraina*, September 6, 1990.

50. For the text, see *Radyanska Ukraina*, November 21, 1990.

51. *Vechirni Kyiv*, November 21, 1990.

52. *Molod Ukrainy*, December 2, 1990.

Yeltsin's remarks in Kiev are perhaps the clearest indication that "Russia" was intent on transforming itself into Russia

All this changed virtually overnight in the aftermath of the failed coup and Ukraine's declaration of independence. The initial decrees issued by Yeltsin and the appointment of RSFSR officials to fill posts in the central administration sparked an angry reaction in Ukraine as well as in other republics. It was reported that Kravchuk was "frightened by calls in Russia that most of the portfolios in the future Union government should go to Russian citizens."⁵³ Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan told the extraordinary session of the USSR Supreme Soviet on its opening day that his republic will never be a "younger brother."⁵⁴ Anatolii Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg, responded that some of the statements being heard from the Russian leadership and the RSFSR deputies were indeed "emotional," but at the same time he called into question the motives of the various republics proclaiming their independence, suggesting that this was a ploy, that "under the cover of this talk about national independence they are trying to retain these [communist] structures, but with a new face."⁵⁵ On the same day, Yeltsin's press office issued a statement saying the RSFSR reserved the right to raise border questions with those republics, apart from the three Baltic states, that declare themselves independent.⁵⁶ The result was a mass protest in Ukraine. The growing tension was aggravated by Gorbachev's somewhat cavalier remark regarding Ukrainian independence in his closing remarks to the USSR Supreme Soviet the following day. The Soviet President, regaining his self-confidence after the putsch, warned that he would do everything in his power to keep the Soviet Union together. As for Ukraine, Gorbachev said he did not think the independence declaration meant that Ukrainians had given up on the Union treaty and the Soviet Union. "Probably what happened in Ukraine was a reaction to the acute situation that emerged in connection with the attempted coup."⁵⁷ Moreover, he appeared to sanction the position taken by the RSFSR leadership, saying that, in the event of secession from the Soviet Union, all kinds of questions would emerge, including territorial ones.

What caused the most consternation in Ukraine, however, was Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov's remarks on central Soviet television that evening. Popov, referring to the "parade of secessions," claimed that the declarations of independence announced by several republics were illegal; that he fully supported Yeltsin's position on the question of borders; and that the recent treaties concluded between Russia and other republics needed to be renegotiated in the event that a given republic seceded from the Soviet Union because of the Russian minorities there. If the question of secession was going to be raised, he maintained, then a number of issues had to be resolved, above all the problem of borders, which, in his view, should be decided by referendum. In this connection, Popov referred, among other places, to Crimea and the Odessa Oblast, in effect questioning Ukraine's jurisdiction over these areas.⁵⁸ The following day, the USSR Supreme Soviet witnessed a rather bizarre scene. Ivan Laptev, who was presiding at the session, broke off

53. *Interfax*, August 24, 1991.

54. *Kazakhstanskaya pravda*, August 28, 1991.

55. *Radio Moscow*, August 26, 1991.

56. The text was issued by TASS, August 26, 1991.

57. TASS, August 27, 1991.

58. *Central Soviet Television*, "Aktualnoe intervyyu," August 27, 1991.

the proceedings to announce that an "emergency situation" had developed and that an RSFSR delegation including Russian Vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi and Yeltsin adviser Sergei Stankevich was on its way to Kiev. He asked that the deputies approve the dispatch of a USSR Supreme Soviet delegation headed by Sobchak as well.⁵⁹ The authorities in Kiev, it turned out, had no advance notice of the visits. When the two delegations arrived in the Ukrainian capital later in the day they were met by a decidedly unfriendly crowd. According to an eyewitness of the negotiations in the Supreme Soviet building, Sobchak's and Rutskoi's initial attitude prompted the Ukrainian side to remind the Russian guests that they were on the territory of a foreign country—that is to say, abroad.⁶⁰ Sobchak, addressing the crowd during a break in the talks, pronounced what was described as a "fatal" sentence: "It is important for us to be together."⁶¹ After about twelve hours, the talks yielded an eight-point communique pledging cooperation to preclude the "uncontrolled disintegration of the Union State" by establishing, for a transitional period, "interim inter-state structures" that could be joined by interested parties who were subjects of the "former USSR." It called on these states to proceed immediately with an economic agreement and refrain from any unilateral decisions on strategic military matters. The document also confirmed the articles of the treaty between Ukraine and the RSFSR relating to the rights of their citizens and the territorial integrity of the two republics and provided for an exchange of envoys.⁶² Sobchak, reporting to the USSR Supreme Soviet on the talks, told the deputies that one of the lessons he learned in Kiev was that "Ukraine, like other republics, has finally taken the path towards genuine independence, genuine freedom, the formation of its own statehood, and no one can force it to diverge from this path."⁶³ A Ukrainian journalist, commenting on the "emergency situation" in Kiev, aptly remarked that one was left with the impression that it took several days for it to dawn upon Moscow that Ukraine had actually declared its independence.⁶⁴

The Ukrainian-Russian "crisis" receded as quickly as it had emerged—at least on the surface. Its immediate cause was the statement issued in Yeltsin's name on borders, which Sobchak was quick to characterize as a "mistake." This view was echoed by Stankevich and Rutskoi, both of whom insisted that Yeltsin's statement had no official force and that the Russian President could not speak for the RSFSR parliament.⁶⁵ In reality, however, there has been little if any improvement in relations. On the contrary, tension between the two sides has visibly increased. This was apparent from the initial claims and counterclaims over the question of who controls the nuclear weapons on Ukraine's territory. In the midst of these polemics, *Moskovskie novosti* published the sensational report that the possibility of a nuclear conflict between Ukraine and Russia had been discussed in the backrooms of the Russian White House. This was denied by all sides, including Yeltsin, who was quoted as saying: "Totally absurd. I discussed this question with military officials; technically it is absolutely

59. *Radio Moscow*, August 28, 1991.

60. *Robitnycha hazeta*, September 3, 1991.

61. *Ibid.*

62. For the text, see *Radyanska Ukraina*, August 31, 1991.

63. *TASS*, August 29, 1991.

64. *Molod Ukrainy*, August 29, 1991.

65. *Molod Ukrainy*, August 28, 1991; *Molod Ukrainy*, August 29, 1991; and *Robitnycha hazeta*, September 3, 1991.

impossible."⁶⁶ Such an explanation could hardly be expected to inspire confidence in Kiev. But the fundamental problem is not any given statement by this or that Russian politician, even if he happens to be the RSFSR President. Such incidents are only a reflection of a much more fundamental problem, i.e. whether or not Russia, in the absence of the imperial center, will be able to discard its imperial legacy.

At this juncture, there is little basis for optimism. Leading RSFSR officials, beginning with Gennadii Burbulis, the RSFSR State Secretary (now the First Deputy Prime Minister), who stated that "Russia is the only republic that could and must become the rightful heir to the [Soviet] Union and all of its structures," have begun to lay claim to the remnants of the Soviet Union.⁶⁷ The group includes, among others, Stankevich and Ruslan Khasbulatov, Chairman of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet.⁶⁸ Within a few days of the Ukrainian referendum, Sobchak, in an interview with *Le Figaro*, focused in detail on the dangers posed by Ukrainian independence, including the forced Ukrainianization⁶⁹ of the Russian minority in Ukraine and the likelihood of a Ukrainian-Russian territorial conflict that could result in a nuclear clash.⁶⁹ At the same time, in a Moscow radio interview, the St. Petersburg mayor claimed that the Ukrainian referendum could not be interpreted as a vote for secession from the Soviet Union. The same argument was advanced several days earlier by Gorbachev in his telephone conversation with U.S. President Bush: "We will not view a decision of the citizens of the Ukraine in favor of independence as a break from the Union. To push matters in this direction would mean heading for disaster—for the Union, for the Ukraine itself, for Russia, for Europe and the world."⁷⁰ The creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States has had no visible moderating effect on tensions between Ukraine and Russia. On the contrary, by shifting the focus of politics in the former Soviet Union from the Yeltsin-Gorbachev axis to the Yeltsin-Kravchuk axis, it has highlighted the fact that the nature of the Ukrainian-Russian relationship has yet to be sorted out. This is clear from the disputes over the future of the former Soviet military forces, particularly the Black Sea Fleet, which Yeltsin has maintained "was, is, and will be Russian."⁷¹ Sobchak, in the meantime, has characterized Ukraine's intention to create its own armed forces as "a huge threat to mankind as a whole."⁷² The latest twist in the unfolding Ukrainian-Russian drama took place in the Russian Supreme Soviet on January 23, 1992, when the overwhelming majority of Russian lawmakers approved a resolution instructing two of its parliamentary committees to study the legality of the 1954 transfer of Crimea from the RSFSR to Ukraine.⁷³ The decision was taken in spite of several agreements between Ukraine and Russia guaranteeing the inviolability of their borders.

66. *Moskovskie novosti*, October 20, 1991, and *Izvestia*, October 24, 1991. See also the interview with Ukrainian First Deputy Prime Minister Kostyantyn Masyk in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 24, 1991.

67. TASS, October 1, 1991, and *Izvestia*, October 2, 1991.

68. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 12, and *Moskovskie novosti*, November 3, 1991.

69. *Le Figaro*, December 4, 1991.

70. TASS, December 1, 1991; *The Boston Globe*, December 1, 1990.

71. Only a few days earlier, the Russian President stated that the Black Sea Fleet could not belong to any former republic and was the indivisible property of the CIS. See *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* for January 10, 1992.

72. AFP, January 9, 1992; *Reuters*, January 9, 1992.

73. TASS, January 23, 1992; *The Times*, January 24, 1992. According to documents published in *Komsomolskaya pravda*, January 22, 1992, Vladimir Lukin, chairman of one of the parliamentary commissions looking into the Crimea question, had proposed to the Russian government that the Crimea issue be used to exert pressure on Kiev with regard to the Black Sea Fleet dispute. Lukin has recently been appointed Russian ambassador to the United States.

Conclusion

How is it that Russian *democrats*, after assuming power in Moscow as a result of their victory in August, i.e. after defeating the center, suddenly lost interest in Russia and began to yearn for "Russia"? Even Galina Starovoitova, Yeltsin's adviser on nationality issues, who together with the historian Yuri Afanasyev has been perhaps the most consistent and harshest critic of the Russian imperial mentality, was at a loss in the face of the empire's collapse: "A brief glance at the map," she told a Moscow newspaper, "reveals the extent of the geographical loss. We will have virtually the same ports as Russia had when Peter the Great came to power."⁷⁴ For the answer, we need to go back to Tsipko's initial critique of Russian sovereignty. Tsipko understood from the start that the RSFSR is an artificial creation that owes its existence to the imperial center. Once that center fell apart there was nothing to prevent the RSFSR, which is a mirror image of the USSR, albeit on a smaller scale, to begin falling apart as well. In a recent interview, Tsipko reminded readers that back in May, 1990, he had warned "that the RSFSR government's struggle against the center undermines the foundation of its own federative existence."⁷⁵ The Russian leadership realized this only after August, 1991, and reverted to "Russia." As one prominent Ukrainian journalist put it: "The Russians are once again thinking like Russians,"⁷⁶ For Ukrainians, this reality was brought home by Russian Minister for the Press and Mass Information Mikhail Poltaranin. Asked recently by a journalist what he thought of the dangers stemming from centrifugal and nationalist tendencies in *Russia*, Poltaranin responded by accusing Ukrainian President Kravchuk of nationalism and stressing the need for Ukrainian-Russian unity.⁷⁷

Against this background, what are the implications for Ukrainian-Russian relations? Admittedly, that is a very difficult question to answer. Certainly, the Russian leadership will eventually have to come to terms with the fact that Ukraine can no longer be viewed as part of "Russia." In effect, this is tantamount to recognizing the loss of its great-power status. That status was projected through the center inasmuch as the Soviet Union and "Russia" were understood to be one and the same thing. Thus, when Ukraine seceded from the Soviet Union and thereby brought about its collapse, in a very real sense it seceded from "Russia" and "destroyed" it as well. The development of a new, modern Russian identity is the crucial precondition for the normalization of Ukrainian-Russian relations. Ukrainians, for their part, will have to display a certain amount of understanding for the fact that Russians cannot be expected to accept Ukraine as a foreign state overnight. Surprisingly, probably the best piece of advice, albeit belatedly and in an entirely different context, has come from Mikhail Gorbachev: "If Leonid Kravchuk decided to talk things over with me, I would tell him: its time to clear things up . . . I believe that relations, particularly between Ukrainians and Russians, should be definitively clarified. Because the greatest difficulty is we ourselves. It's our thinking, our habits, our way of life."⁷⁸

74. *Moskovskie novosti*, October 20, 1991.

75. *Literaturnaya gazeta*, November 6, 1991.

76. Vitalii Portnykov, "Rosiiskyi pohlyad na nezalezhnist'," *Visti z Ukrainy*, No. 43 (October 1991). See also his "Rossiia—pravoprecmnitsa SSSR?" *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 12, 1991.

77. *Trud*, January 14, 1992.

78. *Moskovskie novosti*, November 3, 1991.