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Whither the Ukraine?

Developments in the Ukraine, the largest and most populous non-Russian republic in the USSR, are of crucial significance to the rest of the Soviet Union. Alexander Motyl, Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Nationality and Siberian Studies Program at Columbia University, spoke on the topic of "Whither the Ukraine?" on March 28, 1991. Motyl discussed the results of the recent all-Union referendum for the preservation of the USSR, and their importance for the ongoing process of systemic decay in the Soviet Union.

The referendum produced some interesting and contradictory results. Voters were asked, "Do you think it is necessary to preserve the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renovated federation of equal sovereign republics in which the rights and freedoms of individuals of all nationalities will be fully guaranteed?" In the Ukraine, of the 31 million voters who participated (out of 37 million eligible), about three quarters said yes. However, in the Ukraine there was a second question on the ballot: "Do you support the Ukraine's membership in a renewed federation on the basis of its declaration of sovereignty?" The support for this question was in the 85% range.

Since large numbers of people voted *yes* to both questions, it is unclear what the popular understanding of sovereignty is. Several different interpretations are possible: economic autonomy, political autonomy, independence, or perhaps even the traditional Soviet notion of the word. Motyl's own tentative assessment of the referendum results leads him to conclude that, "inasmuch as there is support for a union in the Ukraine, it is for a union that is substantially looser, far more confederal than what Gorbachev has in mind." Perhaps the best example of what people desire was the treaty signed in the fall of 1990 by RSFSR president Boris Yeltsin and the Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk. The agreement stresses noninterference in internal affairs, acceptance of present boundaries, and the recognition of each other as fully sovereign entities.

Breaking down the results by oblasts produces even more surprises. Conventional wisdom has always held

that Russians or Russified non-Russians would show greater loyalty to the center and be in favor of a more centralized federation. Unexpectedly, the eastern, heavily Russian and/or Russified oblasts of the Ukraine voted 85-90% in favor of the sovereignty declaration. In Donetsk oblast, where ethnic Ukrainians make up approximately one half of the population, 86% of the population voted for sovereignty, while 84% of the population voted for the Union. The conclusion is obvious: substantial numbers of Russians living in the Ukraine support the sovereignty declaration. Voting in past referenda in the Baltics produced similar results. Significantly, all of the oblasts mentioned are working-class areas, which suggests widespread disaffection in those segments of society in whose name the regime claims to rule.

Even more surprising are the results from the Western oblasts, which are considered the most nationalistic. Support for the union was minimal, in the 20-30% range, but support for the sovereignty declaration was minimal as well, around 30%. However, in these areas there was a third issue on the ballot -- do you support out-and-out independence? Here, the support was 85 - 95% in favor of independence.

In the end, however, Motyl was skeptical about the importance of the "electoral results of meaningless elections," or of their effect on the system. "I do not believe that one can vote on the collapse of empires or on the emergence of revolutions . . . this vote is almost irrelevant to ongoing processes in the Soviet Union, which may best be termed either imperial collapse or revolution . . . The electoral results are interesting symptoms of the decay, and I am sure they will be a facilitating factor in accelerating that decay, but I do not think that in and of themselves they are all that significant."

The most important effect of the referendum will be its impact on the attitudes of political elites. The results are promising for *Rukh*, the Ukrainian Popular Front. It will also give more support to Kravchuk, who has adopted a "national communist," quasi-Titoist line. Moreover, those elements within the party still aligned with Gor-



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bachev will be swayed to adopt a more national communist position. "If the party is to survive as a political institution in an environment in which it can no longer count on the support, patronage, and arms of the central institutions, these recalcitrant elements in the party will sooner or later have to come to terms with public opinion."

Humpty Dumpty and Sovietology

What does this portend for the future of the Ukraine? Motyl predicts a "grand coalition," comprising the nationalists in *Rukh*, the "Titoists" under Kravchuk, and the more hard-line communists in the party. Even if this proves true, however, it will have little effect on whether the system will or will not collapse. The importance of a grand coalition is its influence in a post-Soviet period, when it can contribute to the effectiveness, legitimacy, and stability of a future government. "Governments that have mass support (i.e., *Rukh*'s roots with the country), have some ties with existing institutions, such as the party, have some resources (those that still exist within the coffers of the state), might indeed be in a better position to embark on radical economic and political changes than those that do not have such advantages."

Motyl is pessimistic about the longer term prospects for the Soviet system. Perestroika has weakened, if not destroyed, the system as it was: it is impossible to go back, it is impossible to stand still, for that will only deepen the crisis, and the weakness of central institutions makes it impossible to implement reforms. And just as Humpty

Dumpty couldn't be put back together again, things have gone too far for the central government to recreate effective, legitimate, and stable institutions.

Motyl believes that the recent spate of republican sovereignty declarations and the East European revolutions of 1989 were all caused by a similar dynamic. They resulted not from a more benign leadership in the Kremlin, but from the collapse of the center: "The conditions of chaos unleashed in the Soviet Union by perestroika forced the republics to conclude that the only way to survive a sinking ship is to get a lifeboat. The lifeboat is called the republic. Now, will they survive in the seas in their lifeboat is a good question."

Captain Gorbachev of the Titanic

In Gorbachev's view, nationalism bored the holes in the ship of perestroika, causing it to sink. According to Motyl, Gorbachev rammed the ship into an iceberg, and the non-Russians are just escaping. Assuming things continue as they do and there is no crackdown, Motyl concludes that the republics will in the next few years become independent. "Inertia itself will push them in this direction. . . There is no way of surviving in a system that is so decrepit, they have to embark on this route. I suspect this is one reason why the Russians and the so-called Russified population are opting for sovereignty: they understand that their chances of surviving in a lifeboat are better than staying on Gorbachev's ship."

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