

Where Does Europe End?

Throughout its history, Ukraine has straddled the border between East and West. Now, barely a decade after breaking away from the crumbling Soviet Union, it is leaning strongly toward Europe. But Europe is wary.

by Nancy Popson

Even the tiniest of the 33 parties competing in Ukraine's parliamentary elections this past spring boasted all the ephemera of the modern American-style political campaign, from catchy logos to slick television ads. A few members of Ukraine's burgeoning homegrown public relations elite snatched some of the business from even the dominant Russian and Western imagemakers. One 30-second television spot perfectly distilled the choices facing Ukrainians. It opened with a black-and-white animated line drawing of an old train filled with elderly people. The passengers sit tiredly in the compartments, dressed in peasant garb that hangs loosely on their sturdy frames. Their faces are gaunt. The train moves slowly, and the viewer soon sees that the tracks lead to a cliff, where the rails are mangled and broken. The scene then changes to a color animation of a modern high-speed train filled with young people enjoying themselves. The passengers—good-looking, thin, happy—are dressed in European-style clothes. The spot ends with the declaration that it is time for a new generation to take the reins of power in Ukraine.

The ad failed to win the New Generation Party a single seat in the Rada, or parliament, but it put the choices clearly: What kind of train will Ukraine be, and in which direction will it head?

These are questions that Ukrainians have been trying to answer for hundreds of years. Since the 15th century, Ukrainian leaders have struggled to carve out a space for themselves between East and West, between Russia (and later the Soviet Union) to the east and a succession of other powers to the west—Lithuania, Poland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and now the European Union (EU). Ukraine's very name means "borderland."

Twice before in the 11 years since the country achieved its independence from the Soviet Union, voters gave a relatively clear answer to the question of the nation's future, saying, in effect, *ni dyakuyu* (no thanks) to a distinctly Western orientation. Awarding the Communist Party of Ukraine the most seats in the Rada, they chose to pursue a glacial pace of reform and to maintain very close ties with Russia. But on March 31, Ukrainians chose a somewhat different course.

This time, the Communists came in second in the party-list contest. A plurality of seats in the new parliament will be held by groups that back either President Leonid Kuchma, a canny ex-apparatchik and self-proclaimed reformer, or some dozen economic oligarchs who, for the most part, support him. These groups are generally pro-Western. Far more signifi-

Ukraine

cantly, for the first time in Ukraine's brief democratic history, voters put a notable pro-reform opposition in parliament. The top vote-getter in the party-list contest was Our Ukraine, a bloc led by the 48-year-old former prime minister Viktor Yushchenko. It was joined by the reform-minded Bloc for Julia Tymoshenko, led by the charismatic former vice prime minister for energy issues, and Oleksandr Moroz's Socialist Party. Together, the three blocs, which run from the center-right to the center-left, control about one-third of the seats in parliament. (The exact balance of power is difficult to determine, because only half the 450 deputies are selected in the national party-list vote, while half come from single-member districts where the party identities and loyalties of those elected are often unclear.) If these three blocs are able to work together and attract unaffiliated deputies, they may be able to nudge the Ukrainian train toward higher speeds and, working with the pro-presidential forces, in a distinctly westward direction. A few weeks after the election, the presidentially appointed foreign minister, Anatoliy Zlenko, declared, "Ukraine chooses the union it prefers. This is the EU."

The West, however, may not choose Ukraine.

For generations, it was said derisively that "Europe ends at the Pyrenees." Now it appears that Europe's leaders may be drawing another line across the landscape. They have met Ukraine's inquiries about eventual membership in the EU with studied cool. The EU is already preoccupied with plans for an enlargement that could boost membership from the current 15 countries to 27 by the end of the decade, including four of Ukraine's western neighbors—Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. Ukraine's appeal to the Europeans is further limited by political and economic institutions (especially its legal system) that fall far short of European standards. Perhaps just as damning in the EU's eyes is the fact that Ukraine's main

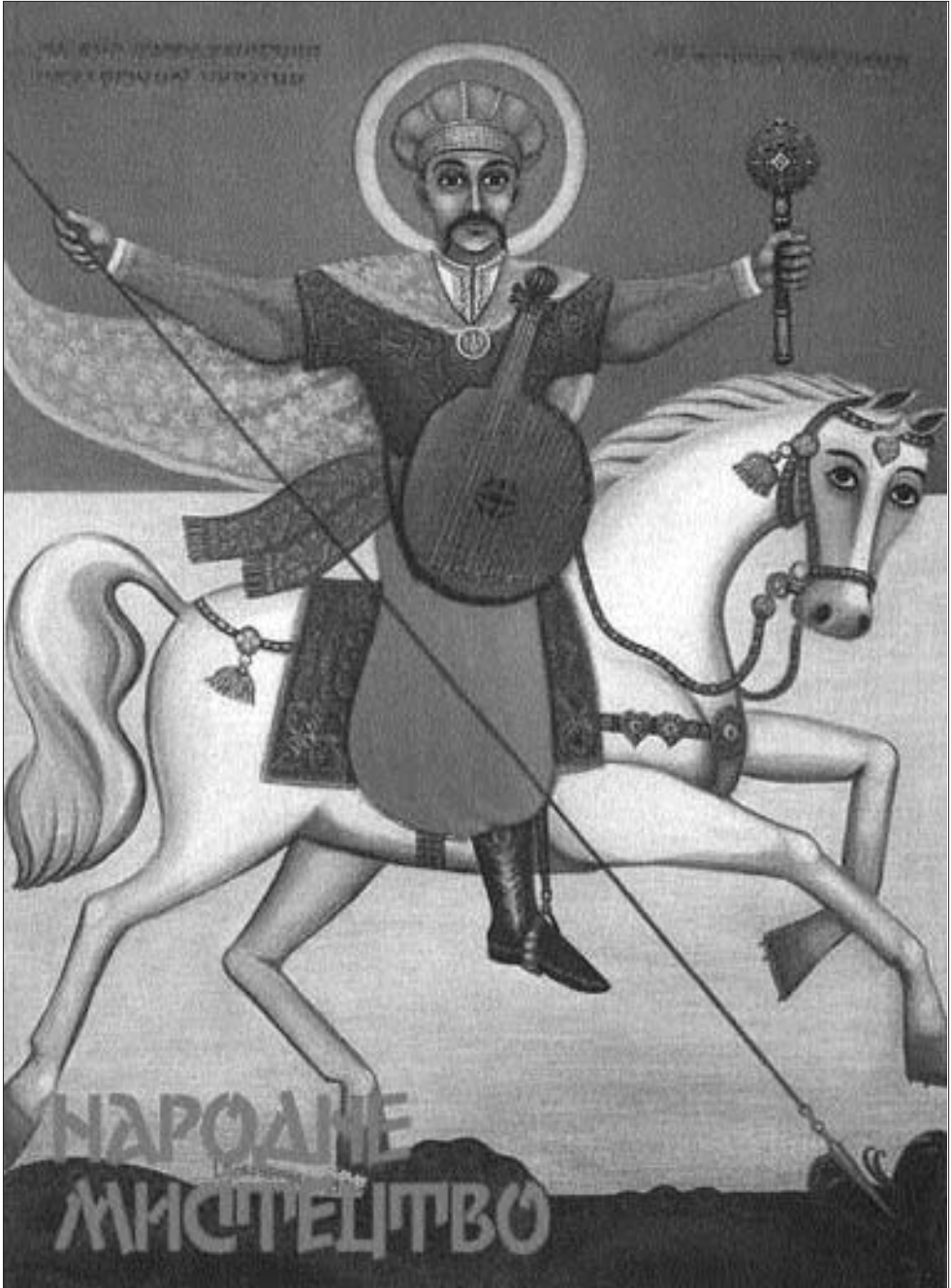
exports are items already overproduced by important EU countries, notably farm products and steel. European officials encourage Ukrainian cooperation and compliance with European legal, democratic, and economic standards, but despite regular entreaties from Kyiv, they refuse to speculate about a schedule for Ukraine's accession to the EU.

As if the cold shoulder were not bad enough, the EU's expansion is likely to measurably harm Ukraine. Because EU rules require members to tighten visa requirements for visitors from non-EU countries, Ukrainians will have difficulty crossing borders into Poland and other countries where they have prospered as traders, and where many have relatives. The border could become, in effect, a new cliff lying in front of the Ukrainian train.

The past decade has not been kind to Ukraine's dreams. When the country declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and later agreed to give up the hundreds of formerly Soviet nuclear weapons on its soil, many observers thought it would quickly become a success story. Larger than any country in the EU and with a population of almost 50 million, Ukraine has abundant natural resources. Its "black soil" farmland made it the breadbasket of the Soviet Union. It contains major industries, concentrated in the east, and like other former Soviet republics it boasts a highly educated population. The eastern city of Kharkiv alone is home to more than 25 universities.

But the reality has fallen dismayingly short of expectations, thanks largely to the Communists' power in parliament. The country's official gross domestic product (GDP) shrank more than 60 percent in the first nine years of independence (though the large, unofficial shadow economy cushioned the fall). Privatization, especially land reform, progressed slowly. The transformation of Ukraine's large collective farms into joint stock companies, peasant associations, cooperatives, and the like has been completed, yet little has really changed. Smaller private

>NANCY POPSON is deputy director of the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute. Copyright © 2002 by Nancy Popson.



Ukraine's separation from the Soviet Union in 1991 rekindled national pride. Ivan Novobranets's icon-like painting from that year evokes the Cossacks and other glories of the Ukrainian past.

farms remain rare. Ukraine's GDP per capita was only \$3,850 (in purchasing-power parity) in 2000—about the same as El Salvador's. According to a 1999 U.S. government estimate, 50 percent of the population lives in poverty. Many workers are paid intermittently, if at all.

The electoral success of Our Ukraine

owes much to Viktor Yushchenko's engineering of a significant economic turnaround during his stint as prime minister, from 1999 to 2001. Yushchenko insisted on transparency in economic transactions, particularly in the energy industry, where barter and the process of holding long-term debts on official books (in the full knowledge

that the government would bail out enterprises in dire straits) had become common practice. Government budgets were kept in check. Ukraine worked closely with the International Monetary Fund, securing credit and implementing IMF-mandated reforms. But many of these changes hurt the interests of the country's dozen or so powerful economic oligarchs, and in April 2001, just as the economy was beginning to pick up, the oligarchs and Communists in the Rada dumped Yushchenko's government in a vote of no-confidence.

While Ukraine struggled economically, its democratic development took an encouraging path, at least through the 1990s. Parliamentary and presidential elections were considered free and fair. A new constitution, ratified in 1996, provides for both a strong president and a vigorous parliament. (Some observers argue that the difficulty of pushing economic reforms through the strengthened Rada is a testament to the strength of the new constitutional system.) And unlike in Russia, the president has not resorted to tanks and mortar shells to mold the parliament to his wishes.

But more recent developments have been less encouraging. In April 2000, a Kuchma-backed national referendum on proposals that would give the president much greater power over parliament won the approval, according to the official tally, of more than 80 percent of the voters. But there were widespread reports of fraud and other irregularities, and the Rada has refused to implement the measures. An even more ominous sign came with the release in November 2000 of audiotapes allegedly made in Kuchma's inner office. The tapes—whose authenticity has not been established—include excerpts of conversations between Kuchma and his aides that cast doubt on the legitimacy of the voting in the 1999 presidential election and the 2000 referendum. Other conversations allegedly document Kuchma's approval of the sale to Iraq of advanced air defense systems capable of detecting stealth bombers. They also suggest that Kuchma or his highest aides were involved

in the disappearance of journalist Hryhoryi Gongadze, an outspoken opponent of the president. An official review of the investigation inspired no confidence in Kuchma's government. When Gongadze's headless body was found in a ditch outside Kyiv, his hands and torso marred by acid, a series of DNA tests by Russian and Ukrainian authorities purportedly showed that the body was not that of the missing man. A Western test proved that it was.

Kuchma soon cracked down on his critics. Julia Tymoshenko was jailed in February 2001 on corruption charges, which raised eyebrows not so much because the charges were implausible—few Ukrainian politicians could pass Western tests of political hygiene—but because of the timing. After spending six weeks in jail, Tymoshenko was released for lack of evidence by a Kyiv court. Two months later, Kuchma supported parliament's dismissal of then-prime minister Yushchenko, a potential rival.

The elections in March 2002 probably put an end to Kuchma's hopes of implementing the referendum measures, but he remains a powerful force, especially with the uncertain balance of power in the Rada. There is no guarantee that Kuchma will not take advantage of future divisions to strengthen his presidential powers and challenge the legislation that bars him from seeking a third term in the 2004 election.

To a certain extent, Ukraine's political divisions reflect the deep cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences that even a casual visitor can see etched in the country's landscape. It requires only a short drive from the Polish border to reach the regional capital of L'viv, a city of picturesque cobblestone streets whose life revolves around its grand old opera house and the tree-lined pedestrian park that lies before it. The rolling countryside is dotted with crumbling palaces of the Austro-Hungarian elite and farms that would look at home in Île-de-France. But some 500 miles to the east, the city of Kharkiv offers a blunt contrast, its grandiose boulevards lined with monumental buildings in the

Stalinist and post-Stalinist style and a vast central square—one of the largest in Europe—still dominated by an imposing statue of Lenin.

Almost in the middle of the country's east-west axis, appropriately enough, sits the capital city of Kyiv. It is no Moscow—life moves a bit more slowly here, skyscrapers are nowhere to be seen, and the streetscape is muted by many trees and parks. Kyiv too has kept its monument to Lenin, and a hulking metal statue of a redoubtable female comrade defending the city with upraised sword (called the “Baba” by locals) dominates the view of its bluffs from the river below. Yet the real center of the city is at Independence Square, the site of a substantial underground shopping mall and a monument to independence, which, in an ambiguous testament to the country's modernizing impulses, occupy space once graced by an array of European-style fountains.

Ukraïne's oldest ties are to Russia. Both countries trace their origins to a single ancient society, Kyivan Rus, and its capital, Kyiv. The Orthodox religious tradition dates back to Kyivan Rus's acceptance of Christianity in the 10th century, and the

modern Russian and Ukrainian languages both descend from old church Slavonic.

For centuries after the collapse of Kyivan Rus in a 13th-century Mongol invasion, the territory that is now Ukraine was divided. The western principalities found themselves under Lithuanian and later Polish rule, while those to the east fell under what would become the Russian Empire. After World War II the Soviet Union reunited the regions, and in 1954 it transferred Crimea, which had been an autonomous republic within the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic since 1921, to Ukraine.

While eastern areas of Ukraine have more deeply rooted ties to Russia, decades of Soviet rule strengthened the entire country's web of connections to its former master. After World War II, the Soviets forcibly resettled most of Ukraine's Poles and Hungarians, leaving a population that was 73 percent Ukrainian and 22 percent ethnic Russian, according to the last Soviet census. Russians form a majority in the Crimea, and they are especially numerous in other areas that were part of the Russian Empire. Then there is a linguistic split, which follows slightly different lines from the ethnic divide. Because Russian was the language of social mobility during the Soviet period,



Ukraine

many ethnic Ukrainians—especially in the cities in the south and east—are more comfortable speaking Russian than Ukrainian. However, the two languages remain mutually intelligible, at least to people raised in the bilingual atmosphere of Ukraine.

Culturally, Ukraine straddles the divide that defines what political scientist Samuel Huntington famously called “the clash of civilizations.” More than 97 percent of its religious congregations are Christian, but most are Orthodox and trace their history to Kyivan Rus. More “Western” strands of Christian faith are also

strong, notably the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in the west and the Roman Catholic Church in the central part of the country. Some of the country’s cultural-religious fault lines were exposed last summer when Pope John Paul II’s visit to Ukraine stirred protests by Orthodox leaders who were alarmed by alleged Latin-rite encroachments on their turf. However, the Orthodox believers themselves are not united. Most of the Orthodox communities remain loyal to the patriarch in Moscow, but many now proclaim their allegiance to an independent Ukrainian patriarch in Kyiv or to the smaller Autocephalous (independent) Orthodox Church.

Ukraine’s history of division and heterogeneity goes a long way toward explaining its post-independence “multivector” foreign policy. Opinion polls show that the public is equally willing to support closer ties with Europe and with Russia, depending on how the question is worded. The voting patterns of the March 31 elections reflected some of these divisions. Opposition candidates fared best in the western regions, while the Communists (who are seen as pro-Russian) did very well in the south and east. This is a somewhat simplistic picture of the cultural-regional divide, but it underlines the difficulty Ukraine—and the new generation in parliament—will have in charting the future.

No such ambiguities hamper Russia. Many Russians cannot understand why



A portrait of President Leonid Kuchma looms over then-prime minister Viktor Yushchenko. The reform-minded Yushchenko, now a parliamentary leader, hopes to succeed his former boss in the 2004 presidential election.

Ukraine wants to be independent, or why Ukrainian patriots choose to emphasize the differences between their close cultures and languages. Russians saw Ukraine's decision to separate from the Soviet Union in 1991 as a pragmatic vote for freedom from communism and for what seemed a rosy economic future, not as a break from the historical relationship between the two countries. While many Ukrainian voters may have shared that view, the first post-communist politicians used their mandate to rebuild the country as an independent nation-state. The sharp focus on nation-building throughout the 1990s led to a pervasive discourse of Ukraine as "other" than Russia. In textbooks and the popular media, Ukrainian history was recast as a long, winding path out of oppression toward the ultimate goal of becoming a united, independent state. While that ideal state is viewed as multicultural and inclusive, it is built on a foundation of Ukrainian ethnic distinctiveness.

All of this is unfathomable to many Russians. The very fact that Kyiv—the historical center of Kyivan Rus, and thus a very strong part of Russian national identity—is now located in another country is baffling to them. Russian business has close connections with Ukrainian factories and mines that were built when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, and Russian nationalists are acutely aware of Ukraine's large Russian-speaking population. Although no official claims have been made, popular Russian politicians such as Moscow's mayor Yuriy Luzhkov often speak of Crimea as rightfully Russian territory. Even the most liberal Russian thinkers cannot conceive of that traditional playground of the tsars and their Soviet successors as part of another state. The Russians maintain a distinctly proprietary demeanor. When a Ukrainian foreign ministry official spoke recently of the country's commitment to EU membership and declared that Ukraine could not simultaneously integrate with the Eurasian Economic Community (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Belarus), the Russian ambassador undiplomatically declared him an "obtuse man"

and reminded Ukrainians that the EU had not issued them any invitations.

Politicians in Kyiv have openly courted Europe. Ukraine has been active in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Partnership for Peace—it recently announced plans to apply for NATO membership—and since 1992 has sent more than 8,000 soldiers to serve in the former Yugoslavia under the United Nations flag. And Ukraine's western regions cooperate with their Central European neighbors in regional economic and environmental initiatives such as the Carpathian Euroregion.

This is not to say that Ukrainian politicians are anti-Russian. Russia is the country's biggest trading partner and a vital source of oil and gas. The two countries are bound by strong cultural, linguistic, and familial ties. Ukrainians may savor their political independence, but the prospect of severing all links is something few can imagine.

Which way will the Ukrainian train go? While the majority of the Rada's deputies now look to Europe as Ukraine's future partner, the tracks leading toward Russia, though fraught with perils for Ukrainian independence, remain alluringly open. Ukraine's leaders are likely to turn back to brother Russia if faced with too many obstacles on the track to Europe.

With Ukraine occupying an important position on the new frontier between "the West and the rest," the country's domestic political squabbles and shifting coalitions take on far more international importance than they otherwise might. A Ukraine that embraced Western standards of law, business, and politics would be in a position to enhance European stability, either within a larger Europe or as a strong, democratic, economically stable neighboring state. Ukraine needs the support of the international community if it is to move in that direction. Building more restricted borders between Ukraine and Europe will only weaken the reform impulse and strengthen Russia's influence, leaving a frontier that in the future could require far more attentive guarding. □