Special Analysis

USSR: Ukrainian Politics Come Alive

Rukh, the Ukraine's fast-developing popular front, is raising national consciousness in the republic and rallying support for substantial autonomy. Ukrainian nationalism does not yet pose a problem as immediate as that Moscow faces in the Baltics, but the trend is toward greater assertiveness, less control from Moscow, and in the western Ukraine outright independence. If events begin to move too quickly, new Ukrainian party chief Ivashko might switch from tacit cooperation and attempts at co-optation to tougher measures.

Rukh's leaders say their immediate objective is that scheduled republic and local legislative elections in March be fair and free. They plan to field a candidate for every seat available. Ultimately, Rukh wants a multiparty system, religious freedom, ownership of private property, and Ukrainian economic self-management. It rejects secession but would eliminate the constitutional article guaranteeing the Communist Party the "leading role" in Soviet society and politics.

The Labor Connection

Rukh is courting elements of the independent labor movement, and the miners are being politicized. Representatives of strike committees in Donetsk, Kremenchuk, and Poltava attended Rukh's founding congress in September. The miners may support Rukh's social and ecological reform proposals but are not interested at present in nationalist and secessionist issues. Many Donetsk miners are either non-Ukrainians or Russified Ukrainians who reportedly value their ties to the USSR's other miners over ties to Ukrainian nationalists.

Poland's Solidarity is influential with some Ukrainian activists. Rukh has made contacts with Solidarity and has expressed interest in emulating its organization. At Rukh's founding congress, a Solidarity delegation advised striking miners to support Rukh, and miners in the western Ukraine have hinted at forming a free union modeled on Solidarity. Workers apparently copied Solidarity tactics in successfully organizing last month's citywide strikes in L'vov to protest police brutality.

New Party Leader Ivashko

In an interview last month, Ivashko called himself a reformer in Gorbachev's mold. Ivashko met with the organization's new leader three days before Ivashko was appointed

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first secretary and agreed to support Rukh's proposals to liberalize the republic's election and language laws. Many nationalists, however, believe that Ivashko is still a son of the old system and only a temporary solution, although an improvement over his hardline predecessor.

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Skepticism about Ivashko's commitment to reform has been heightened by the brutal suppression of a nationalist demonstration in L'vov on 1 October and by the appointment of Ideology Secretary Yelchenko—a staunch opponent of nationalism who once said Rukh would exist only over his dead body—to head a new department of interethnic relations. Nevertheless, Ivashko probably will continue to cooperate with Rukh at least in the runup to the March elections, which are likely to sweep out many traditional party officials.

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Outlook

The Ukraine has not experienced the interethnic conflicts that have occurred elsewhere in the USSR: most differences there have been between Ukrainians who see themselves as members of the larger Russian nation, which includes their Russian and Belorussian cousins, and those who do not. The Kharkov faction of Rukh recently split from the parent group, accusing it of radical nationalism. The faction's leader said his group will join the Kharkov People's Front, a more moderate organization that seeks only to preserve Ukrainian culture. The absence of widespread anti-Russian sentiment among the eastern Ukrainian population probably will continue to moderate Rukh's assertive nationalist agenda, but tensions between the western and the eastern Ukraine and between the western Ukraine and Moscow are likely to rise. Addressing Soviet students last week, Gorbachev warned that Crimea and Donetsk might opt to join Russia if the Ukrainian language is imposed exclusively in that Russified area of eastern Ukraine.

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Ivashko probably is hoping to co-opt some of Rukh's leaders by being responsive to its agenda. At the same time, he is likely to try to polarize and thus weaken the movement by sowing dissension among its various factions. Moscow is not likely to tolerate prolonged unrest in the USSR's second-largest republic but will be reluctant to use force on a large scale. Flashpoints will occur if Rukh presses its demands for a multiparty system or an independent Ukrainian Communist party or if demonstrations in the western Ukraine increase in size and frequency.

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Western Ukraine: Drive for Independence

While the eastern Ukraine has been under Russian influence since the Czarist era, parts of the western Ukraine, along with the three Baltic states and Moldavia, were annexed under the secret terms of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. More than 90 percent of the 10 million people who live in the western Ukraine are Ukrainians. Political groups there—like the Helsinki Union, Christian Union, Leva, and the recently created Christian Democratic youth organization—are openly advocating secession. Although party officials have put pressure on Rukh to exclude these organizations from its ranks, individuals can still join the popular front and are among its leaders.

The banned Ukrainian Catholic (Uniate) Church is also viewed by Moscow as a force for independence. At Friday's historic meeting between President Gorbachev and Pope John Paul II   Gorbachev will discuss legalization of the church, which was incorporated into the Russian Orthodox Church in 1946 because of its alleged link to nationalism.   Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze have expressed concern about the nationalist aspect of the Ukrainian Catholic Church whose estimated 5 million worshipers in the western Ukraine are the most activist and well-organized group in the republic. Timed to put pressure on Soviet authorities before Gorbachev's meeting on Friday, tens of thousands of Ukrainians demonstrated yesterday in three western Ukrainian cities to demand legalization of the Uniate Church. And Deputy Foreign Minister Adamishin said last week that legislation on religious freedom planned for early next year will allow Ukrainian Catholics to register.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian Catholic activists have already acquired more than 80 churches by simply occupying empty ones or, in some cases, Orthodox priests have come over and brought the church with them. This weekend, authorities in L'vov gave back a small church to L'vov Catholics, which passed into Russian Orthodox hands after the Uniate Church was banned in 1946.

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