

The social consequences of Ukrainian independence

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August 24 witnessed extensive celebrations, with banners and festive speeches, celebrating the Ukrainian national identity. The celebrations, however, could not disguise the social catastrophe that has unfolded in the ten years since Ukrainian independence.

President Leonid Kuchma commemorated the tenth anniversary of independence together with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the new Russian ambassador in Kiev and former chairman of Gazprom, Victor Chernomyrdin, Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski and other guests.

When the independence of Ukraine was declared on August 24, 1991, and confirmed in a referendum by 90 percent of the population on the first of December the same year, many hoped for an improvement in the economic situation as well as greater democracy. The independence of Ukraine was finally sealed by the first president, Leonid Kravchuk, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and the head of state of Belarus, Stanislav Shushkevich, who formalised the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the founding of the Confederation of Independent States (CIS).

Since then feverish efforts have been made to inculcate school children in a sense of national identity. At the heart of such education is the 24th of August. In a history book for 12-year-olds, children are called upon to “honour” the declaration of independence of August 24, 1991, and “love, covet and strengthen the power” of the national state that emerged, defending what is “true” against what is “false” (i.e., everything Soviet).

The current territory of the Ukraine was fought over for centuries by Lithuania, Poland and Russia, and from the nineteenth century belonged almost entirely to tsarist Russia. Consequently, Ukrainian authorities justify nationalism today by going back to pre-Christian times. According to the school book: “There can be no doubt that the Tryella culture” from the years 4000 to 2000 BC had an enormous significance “in the formation of the ethnic composition of the Ukrainian being”. It made Ukrainian people, the book continues, superior to White Russians and Russians. Ukrainians had a better understanding of democracy and already enjoyed great international authority in the pre-Christian world.

But such chauvinist claims cannot hide the fact that the working class has paid a terrible price for independence. In common with the other states that emerged from the break-up of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has demonstratively shown that state independence and the restoration of capitalism do not represent a progressive answer to the economic stagnation that characterised the final years of the Soviet system. On the contrary, with independence the ruling bureaucratic layer was able to complete the destructive work that had begun with the rise of Stalin in the 1920s.

The initiative for independence came from the highest levels of the Ukrainian bureaucracy. Faced with a profound economic crisis, the bureaucracy was able to establish a new basis for its rule through the introduction of capitalist property forms. Supported by Western banks and politicians, a part of the Stalinist ruling layer, employing deceit and theft, was able to emerge as a new elite. In so doing, they destroyed not only the state structure established inside the Soviet Union, but also the social,

cultural and economic gains that had their roots in the October Revolution. The end result has been an enormous growth of social inequality.

Ukraine is geographically the biggest state in Europe. It has a population of nearly 50 million. Of this total, just 2 percent possess more than 94 percent of the national wealth. This tiny layer stands in stark contrast to the mass of the people, who possess virtually nothing.

According to current figures, 46 percent of the population earn less than \$2 a day, but are expected to pay Western prices for food and clothing. Since 1990, average wages for workers have declined by 70 percent, and the decline is continuing.

In 1999 the average monthly wage was around \$47, but in the first quarter of the year 2000, this figure had sunk to \$39. In 1999, pensions averaged \$16 a month, compared with a current monthly pension of \$15—a quarter of the figure reckoned to be necessary to maintain a minimum existence in Ukraine.

Since 1990 agricultural production has halved. In order to survive, most inhabitants of the big cities are forced to grow their own vegetables in garden plots or in collaboration with their families.

Official figures estimate unemployment at more than 2 million, or 11.4 percent. According to experts, however, hidden unemployment is far higher. Despite an increase in the Net Domestic Product of 9.4 percent this year, the NDP remains 60 percent below the level of Soviet times. Industrial production rose by 18.8 percent this year, but still remains 70 percent below the level of 1991.

In today’s Ukraine 1.5 million children are homeless. There has been a drastic increase in the death rate of young people between the ages of 15 and 24, along with a dramatic decline in the formerly high level of school education.

Of the estimated 2 million women world-wide who are victims of international prostitution and smuggling gangs, 40 percent come from Eastern Europe, and over 100,000 from Ukraine. Between 70 and 80 percent are women under the age of 18. Despite the enormous numbers involved in this female slave trade, there were just 37 prosecutions over the past three years, and most of these cases were dismissed.

In Ukraine people die trying to dismantle and steal high-tension electricity cables for their copper content. Life expectancy has declined from 67 to 58 years over the last decade, and the health system is imploding. Illnesses that had been largely overcome in the early years of the Soviet Union, such as tuberculosis, Black Plague, Yellow Fever, typhus and cholera, are appearing with increasing regularity.

On August 21 the eastern Ukraine television channel *Ukraina Novy Kanal* broadcast a report from the city of Dnepropetrovsk, where a tuberculosis epidemic is spreading. According to official figures, 17,000 out of a population of 1,000,000 have been thus far affected, including 9,000 children. It is presumed, however, that the actual numbers are much higher. Deputy Mayor Vasyl Povkov stated on television that 170 people had already died this year from tuberculosis, twice as many as in the

previous year.

Last week the cholera gene “El Tor Vibrio” was discovered in the river Dnestr, which borders Moldavia and Ukraine. Under conditions of warmer water in the summer months, the gene is capable of unleashing a cholera epidemic. The Dnestr region is an internationally renowned spa and rehabilitation area. This latest alarm is the fifth since 1996.

During the year 2000 alone, cases of HIV-AIDS increased in eastern Europe and the CIS states from 420,000 to over 700,000. An above average increase has been recorded in Ukraine and Russia, where the number of victims has more than doubled, from 130,000 to 300,000, in 2000.

In 1997 the chairman of the Ukrainian Committee for the Combating of Drug Dependence and AIDS Prevention, Valery Ivasyuk, already warned of a “second Chernobyl”. The first indications of a dramatic spread of the disease surfaced between 1995 and 1996, when cases increased 10-fold in one year.

Citing international statistics, the Polish weekly *Polityka* wrote that HIV had spread more quickly in eastern Europe than other regions of the world. Particularly affected regions include centres of heavy industry such as in Donetsk, Kharkov and Dnepropetrovsk, as well as the Crimea.

A United Nations AIDS report anticipates that by the year 2010, 6 percent of the Ukrainian population will be victims of HIV-AIDS. The report attributes the dramatic development of the disease to “the lack of public information, poverty and unemployment, as well as access to cheap drugs”.

The extent of the economic decline since independence is indicated by the proliferation of methane gas explosions in Ukrainian mines. Less than two weeks ago 37 miners were burnt to death in an explosion at the biggest mine in the Donetsk region, Sazyadko. Dozens of other workers were badly injured in the blast.

In May 1999, 41 miners died in a disaster at the same mine. After China, Ukrainian mines are thought to be the most dangerous in the world. The situation is similar in other branches of industry. According to a statistic published by the Labour Ministry in Kiev, an average of 95 workers were injured every day last year—30 with injuries resulting in severe physical handicaps.

A total of 1,325 workers lost their lives at work last year, and 800,000 engineers lack sufficient safety precautions at their place of work. Some 9,000 factories are in a dangerous condition. A cursory check revealed that 37,000 workers laboured under conditions dangerous to their health.

Recently a Moscow social scientist ironically commented that compared to the situation in Ukraine, the extensive limitations and curbs on press freedom in Russia pale into insignificance. In comparison with Ukraine, the Russian press flourishes in “complete democracy,” he said. Newspapers, TV and radio stations that have fallen out of official favour in Ukraine have suffered the imposition of high taxes or been provided with fabricated and false documents, which are then used as a pretext to close them down.

When such measures have not worked, journalists have been murdered or kidnapped. The best known case was that of Georgy Gongadze a year ago. A former co-worker of Kuchma, Gongadze had published incriminating documents and was subsequently found abducted and murdered. The circumstances of his death provoked a state crisis that lasted until April this year.

According to the Ukrainian union of journalists, 41 of its members have suffered violent deaths in the 10 years since independence. Some were victims of mysterious accidents, while others were simply shot dead on the street. There have been no investigations into the identity of the murderers or those who issued the murder contracts.

The latest case concerns the brutal murder of TV journalist Igor Alexandrov from the town of Slovyansk in eastern Ukraine. He was beaten to death in his office on July 4 by a group of thugs armed with

baseball bats. Alexandrov’s offence was to have reported in his programme *Tor* of corruption and conspiracy between police, captains of industry, politicians and an oligarchy from Donetsk.

Political intrigues and persistent power struggles between various wings of the former Stalinist elite have characterised the Ukrainian version of parliamentary democracy since independence.

The career of the country’s president, Leonid Kuchma, is a case study of the rise of an elderly, narrow-minded bureaucrat into an egotistical representative of big business. Kuchma, as a leading member of the Stalinist secret police, was for many years director of the biggest Ukrainian missile factory in Dnepropetrovsk. Since taking power in 1994, he has drawn support from various groups representing all political camps—social democrats, Communists, liberals, conservatives, Greens, as well as ultra-right nationalists.

Since April, his most important parliamentary props have been leading members of the Communist Party and oligarchs with close connections to Russia. He was able to survive the Gongadze crisis only with the help of these groups. In April they secured him a majority in parliament and with a vote of no confidence forced the resignation of the prime minister, Victor Yushchenko, a former banker with a pro-Western orientation.

None of the political factions or groups occupying the 445 seats in the Ukrainian parliament (Rada) represents the interests of the broad masses of the population—whether it be Kuchma’s alliance, the seven-party opposition alliance of Julia Timoshenko (Party of the Motherland), or Olexandr Moroz’s Socialist Party of Ukraine.

Julia Timoshenko, also known as the “beautiful Julia” or the “Gas princess”, is a millionaire. Her roots are in the main business and political clan from Dnepropetrovsk.

In the mid-1990s this clan took power in Ukraine, only to subsequently split into various factions. Timoshenko was the director of a large energy concern before she undertook the reorganisation of the gas industry as minister for energy under Kuchma. In January this year she was dismissed and went over to the opposition. Since then she has enjoyed the good will of Western bankers and politicians and is regarded as a serious candidate in fresh elections planned for March of next year.

The biggest party at the moment in Ukraine is the former Ukrainian Communist Party (CPU). It has been the only party to obtain 25 percent of the vote in elections and currently has 112 deputies in parliament. It has regularly used its influence to maintain political stability in times of crisis, such as the miners’ protests of 1998. In the crisis ensuing from the Gongadze affair, the CPU used its influence to defend the status quo.



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