

Options for Ukraine

By John Brown | December 20, 2004

The tense political situation in Ukraine may find a peaceful solution. But, at this critical juncture, efforts to maintain Ukraine as currently configured could turn out to be dangerously counterproductive. Ukraine should therefore seriously consider the option of working with all parties involved in its current crisis—including the European Union, Russia, and the United States—in taking possible steps toward its nonviolent dismemberment in a manner acceptable to its variegated population. The possibility of such a peaceful, democratic, and internationally acceptable geographical rearrangement of Ukraine should at least be put on the table before it is too late to prevent an unpredictable situation from falling out of control from increased regional, ethnic, economic, cultural, and linguistic conflicts.

Ukraine as it exists today is a failed state for several reasons. First, since its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has not succeeded in significantly improving the well-being of its population. Second, its ingrained political structures have not allowed democracy and a free press to develop. Third, as recent events demonstrate, it has clearly proved incapable of bridging the complex divide between its Russian-oriented, Orthodox eastern part and its westward-looking, Catholic area. Ukraine's most significant achievement in the past decade was to dispose of its nuclear missiles, but this did more to ease tensions with Russia and the United States than to ameliorate the lives its ordinary citizens.

Regrettably, changing the ruling regime in Ukraine to a more European-oriented, democratic one is unlikely to provide a satisfactory, long-term solution to its enormous endemic problems. These stem in large part from the fact that the area, as a former Soviet republic with nearly 50 million people, is essentially a geopolitical construction of the USSR, not a country with sufficient national identity or self-governing experience in its history to develop as a viable economic and political entity. Ukrainian émigré nationalists will disagree with this view, but they cannot ignore the fact that prior to 1991 Ukraine—the name in its original meaning means borderland—in its entire past was “independent” for only a very short period after World War I. And it certainly was

never a model of democracy, even if the Cossacks of the region earned a reputation for disregarding authority.

There are two options for the next ruling party in Ukraine. The leadership—be it composed of the current opposition or those struggling to remain in power—can try to keep the country geographically as it is. Perhaps this is possible, and provides the comforting panacea of not rocking the boat, on the surface at least. But, from a longer-term perspective, preserving Ukraine as it is could increase tensions between its ethnic groups and regions, as demands for autonomy from Russian-speaking areas already suggest. Dangerously, maintaining Ukraine as one unit at all costs could lead to greater internal conflicts leading to a bloody, Balkans-like dissolution of the country—and possible Russian intervention ostensibly to protect ethnic-Russian areas. One must not forget that modern Ukraine is not foreign to civil war, having experienced a horrid one less than a hundred years ago. In such a situation, democratic and economic reform would be all but impossible.

A second option for the Ukrainian leadership, whatever its political colors, would be the Czech and Slovak solution. After the end of Communist rule Czechoslovakia's parliament decided to split Czechoslovakia in two—the Czech Republic and Slovakia—for a range of reasons, many of which were far from noble. But not a shot was fired during the

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separation, and although the “velvet divorce” has not turned the two sections of the former country into economic miracles, it has prevented tensions between them. As separate entities capable of keeping track of their own individual needs, they should play a role in NATO and the European Union more beneficial to their local populations than as smaller parts of a larger “Czechoslovakia.”

There are no models for the future of Ukraine, only options. A peaceful division of the area would be a complicated, time-consuming process requiring extensive international involvement and patience. A reconfiguration process would face great challenges, including determining the exact nature of the new entities.

Three significant challenges would face such a process. One is to effectively discourage pre-21st century romantic notions of national identity. These images, often propagated by the Ukrainian diaspora, bear little resemblance to the country in which it does not live. This “long-distance nationalism” suggests that Ukraine as it now appears on the map is bound to play a unique role in world history because of its size and location. Two, Great-Russia imperialists, who hold expansionist illusions, would also have to be held in check. Finally, Poles who want a large

buffer state between themselves and Russia would have to be reminded that the well-being of the people in Ukraine, not imaginary *realpolitik*, is what matters most.

If the tense political situation in Kiev gets worse and if the *status quo*—i.e., Ukraine as currently configured—is maintained, separatist political groups and nationalities could resort to violence. Given such dire possibilities, Ukrainian leaders should look beyond *a priori* concepts of how the continued existence of today’s Ukraine is in the best interests of its long-suffering population or international stability. All options, including the geopolitical reinvention of Ukraine itself, deserve consideration. This could lead to a real Ukraine—not the artificial prolongation of “the” Ukraine forced upon its people during Soviet times.

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