
Special Report: Ukraine

One year after independence, Ukraine faces test of sovereignty

by Rachel Douglas

You can fly into Kiev now, as I did a year and two days after Ukraine's proclamation of its independence on Aug. 24, 1991, on an aircraft of Air Ukraine, marked with the Ukrainian national "trident" crest freshly painted in the national blue and yellow colors, where formerly there were the drab markings of Soviet Aeroflot. Political activists, still joyful about the establishment of an independent Ukraine after hundreds of years within the Russian empire, are preoccupied with whether their nation's sovereignty can be maintained in the face of pressure from Moscow to maintain the relationships of domination of the former Soviet Union, and in the face of an economic crunch that grows worse from day to day.

Leaders of the Ukrainian independence movement Rukh, which has split into several parties and movements, consider Ukraine's ability to resist the waves of inflation rolling in from Russia as fatally compromised by former Communist Party leader, now President, Leonid Kravchuk's close coordination of economic and political matters with Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Looking for alternative economic ties in the West, however, Ukraine finds the unappetizing prospect of enslavement to International Monetary Fund (IMF) programs that prioritize asset-stripping and the collection of debt service, including in the worst case by means of "shock therapy" measures (cancellation of subsidies, total unfettering of prices, *inter alia*) that condemn an economy to death.

Shock therapy rejected

Kravchuk's government itself has officially rejected IMF shock therapy. In an Aug. 31 press conference in Kiev, Economics Minister Valentin Symonenko announced that "an immediate transition to the market economy is unrealistic, as the Russian experience demonstrates. . . . We do not need radical shock therapy. Instead, we need slow, evolutionary reform." He promised to submit a package to parliament on Sept. 16, which would allow only very gradual privatization.

At the Dialogue Congress-Ukraine held in Alpbach, Austria just after the independence anniversary (see article, p. 37), other officials sounded the same note. Vasily Yevtukov, chairman of the Ukrainian Industrialists and Entrepreneurs

Association and a member of the Supreme Council of Ukraine, said there, "It is better to learn from the mistakes made in carrying out reforms in Russia and other countries." Ukraine needed "an evolutionary path to avoid the upheavals that can nullify our efforts." According to Yevtukov, the "paradoxical and illogical ways" that prevailed during Soviet rule "demand for us some time to develop useful ties."

Struggle for basic necessities

For Ukrainian citizens, caution is not far removed from paralysis. With inflation running at 20% per month, people are forced to spend much of their time in a scramble for basic requirements, including food. The Kiev subway system is as jammed in the middle of the afternoon as it is at rush hour; thousands of people are not at work, but on the move, organizing the means for themselves and their families to survive another week, or a few more days. On Saturday mornings, the Republic Stadium in Kiev is the scene of a gigantic flea market, to which people come by the thousands, in a stream that pours out of the subway system starting at 7:00 a.m. and not stopping until dusk.

How high the stakes are in Ukraine's search for a solution to the economic crisis, was revealed by Dr. Leonid Pyrig at the Alpbach conference. Pyrig, chairman of the Ukrainian Medical Association, said that Ukraine was facing a total public health collapse, aggravated by the drastic ecological damage inflicted during the Soviet period.

Death rate higher than birth rate

In 1991, Pyrig reported, the death rate in Ukraine was 35% higher than the birth rate, which poses the burning question of "what will happen in 1992?" Many couples are deciding not to have children, in the face of the growing social and economic problems. Meanwhile, only 20% of children entering school are healthy, and at the end of the schooling, only 5-8% are healthy. Throughout the country, the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster and other devastations dating from the years of Soviet control have produced grave ecological and public health problems. In this setting, he said, the population's "right to well-being and health" is a pressing issue of the day.