

Ethnic and Social Composition of Ukraine's Regions and Voting Patterns

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, MAR 10 2015

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This article looks at the ethnic and social makeup of Ukrainian regions and its impact on voting patterns over the past two decades. While sceptical of a simplistic division of the country through spoken language and ethnic affiliation, it maintains that there are particular patterns of voting that have been repeated in each presidential and parliamentary election, and that regional voting is the most characteristic feature of Ukrainian elections. At the same time, there are a number of other factors that may affect voting that are not dealt with here, such as the social and economic initiatives of the candidate or party, the social position of the voter, fluctuations in the standard of living, and incentives to vote a particular way (Kulyk, 2011; Colton, 2011).

Upon gaining its independence in 1991, Ukraine had several distinct regions and a number of significant ethnic minorities, most prominent of which were Russians. The only part of Ukraine with a Russian majority was the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, but Russians comprised significant communities in the far eastern oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as in Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa, Kharkiv, and others. The far western region of Transcarpathia has a significant Hungarian population, and there are numerous smaller nationalities that have had homes in Ukraine for many generations, such as Poles, Belarusians, and Jews, as well as Bulgarians in the Odessa Oblast in the South.

One difficulty about making any sweeping assertions about the composition of the population is the lack of censuses in the independence period. To date, there has been a single census in 2001 (the first since 1989), and an anticipated new census in 2010 has been postponed until 2016. That census may also be in doubt, given enforced territorial changes in Ukraine, with the Russian annexation of Crimea, and separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk, with the establishment there of so-called People's Republics supported by the Russian Federation. The 2001 census indicated mainly the consolidation and growth of the Ukrainian population (77.8%, up from 72.7% in 1989), partly through assimilation and changes in self-identity, and partly through migration, of Russians in particular. The Russian population, correspondingly, declined from 22.1% to 17.3% (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2001).[1]

There is a marked difference, however, between ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers, and the latter predominate in the East and South, and maintain a significant presence in all parts of Ukraine other than the far western regions. In 2006-07, research conducted by the Razumkov Center revealed that the percentage of Ukrainians who considered Russian to be their first language was 25.7%, and that 52% of the population considered Ukrainian to be their native language (Lenta.ru, 2007). A more recent study suggests that about 27.5 million people 'actively' use the

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Russian language at work and about 37 million (or 80% of the population) has fluency in it. Ten years earlier, the figure had been 42 million (Aref'ev, 2013).

Keith Darden has noted a tendency in Ukrainian elections to continue habits that were familiar in pre-Soviet times. Thus, the former Austrian-Polish territories of Ukraine behave quite differently: supporting pro-Western candidates, adopting strong pro-European Union positions, and fearing Russian influence above all else (Darden, 2013). These regions are Ukrainian-speaking, and have consistently supported pro-Western candidates in presidential elections: Leonid Kravchuk rather than Leonid Kuchma in 1994; but Kuchma rather than the Communist candidate Petro Symonenko in 1999; Yushchenko in 2004; and Tymoshenko in 2010. The main difference between the pre-Soviet period and today is that ethnic Ukrainians now comprise a majority in urban centres, whereas in the past they were rural, marginalised, and at times disaffected. Many Western Ukrainian cities have adopted a strong nationalistic position, and Western Ukrainians played a prominent role in the 2013-14 protests known as the 'Euromaidan' (Nuzhdin et al., 2013).

Western Ukraine remains the most rural region of Ukraine. Yet its history is the most turbulent and controversial. The integral nationalism of the 1930s, which saw the rise of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), with its dictum of 'Ukraine for Ukrainians,' and the formation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) during the war (traditionally declared to have taken place in October 1942, but in reality in the spring of 1943), has created many of the legends of current historical memory: a quest for independence and freedom from the Russian-led Soviet Union, and from the incursive Russian Federation today. The legacy of these formations is controversial. They are accused not only of being anti-Soviet, but pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic (Katchanovsky, 2010). Though right-wing nationalism has been notably unsuccessful in terms of winning seats in Parliament, many observers perceive significant influence of right extremism during Euromaidan, and in the current war in the eastern regions (Cohen, 2014).

Western Ukraine forms one part of an electoral magnet that has pulled the country in two different directions simultaneously. The other is eastern Ukraine, but more specifically the two far eastern oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk. Before discussing the characteristics of this region, it should be noted that the term 'eastern Ukraine' was formerly much broader than it appears today. The area was the heartland of industrial development in the Russian Empire, and its traditions were transferred to the Soviet Union during the crucial phase of its industrial development. It embraced Stakhanovism in its coalmines in the mid-1930s – a work ethic largely based on 'shock troops' and over-fulfilment of state plans by artificial means. It was also the very centre of the Soviet Communist Party. Former leader Nikita Khrushchev (1964-71) made his career in the Donbas, nurtured by his mentor, the Stalinist henchman Lazar Kaganovich. Leonid Brezhnev (Soviet leader 1964-82) was born in Dniprodzherzhinsk, a city named after the first leader of the Soviet secret police (the Cheka), Feliks Dzerzhinsky.

Not surprisingly, therefore, between 1991 and 1999, the Communist Party of Ukraine remained the most powerful force in the region. But after independence, there was a growing entrepreneurial class that arose from the ashes of Communism, using links to the former Communist leadership to establish private businesses. Bitter competition took place between elites of the cities of Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk. In the mid-1990s, the latter city was in the ascendancy: Kuchma, the president, had been manager of the rocket-manufacturing plant at Yuzhmash in the region; Pavlo Lazarenko, Prime Minister in 1996-97, had headed the 'agro-industrial complex' of Dnipropetrovsk in the early 1990s, and his Deputy Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, was born in the city. The current governor of Dnipropetrovsk, the billionaire Ihor Kolomoisky, was originally a supporter of Tymoshenko and her Tymoshenko Bloc in parliament. Today, however, Dnipropetrovsk under Kolomoisky's leadership has taken a strong pro-Ukrainian and pro-Western stance, separating it firmly from the staunchly pro-Russian cities of Donetsk and Luhansk.[2]

Donetsk and its region, on the other hand, have been the centre of the rise of the Regions Party, financed by the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov and personalised by the figure of Viktor Yanukovich, the central figure in the disputed election that brought about the Orange Revolution and the eventual victory of Viktor Yushchenko. The party's tentacles extended well beyond Donetsk, but the city remained its central location, and the Yanukovich Cabinet formed in 2010 was dominated by Donetsk politicians. The Party of Regions expanded through financial support of businessmen who exploited the country's assets, manipulated the legal system, controlled banks and businesses, and used parliament as a forum to control the rest of the country (Kuzio, 2015; Riabchuk, 2012). The year 2010

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represented the peak of the Regions' power. The party's rise appeared mercurial, but it was facilitated by disillusionment with Yushchenko's presidency that appeared initially to be about to set Ukraine on a new Western-oriented journey.

Between these two magnets of the West and 'Far East,' the rest of Ukraine has not exhibited particularly strong political directions. In 1999, most voters perceived Kuchma as the most viable alternative, although the Communist Symonenko won a respectable 37.8% of the votes. In 2004, in the initial election runoff of the two leading candidates on 21 November, Ukraine was divided almost equally between supporters of Yushchenko and Yanukovych (voting manipulations aside). The latter had been endorsed by Vladimir Putin and his election posters appeared in Moscow, as well as Ukraine. The Orange Revolution represented a protest against electoral manipulations and a movement towards Europe. Yet the most notable feature of the second runoff on 26 December 2004 was the lack of districts in which voting was relatively even, despite the fact that Yushchenko won overall with 52%, compared to his rival's 44% (Romanyuk et al., 2010). The points are worth elaborating.

In the twenty-seven regions of Ukraine (the cities of Sevastopol and Kiev each constituted one region), in only one – Kherson – was the voting close (43.4% for Yushchenko and 51.3% for Yanukovych). Elsewhere, voters opted for one candidate or the other by large margins, and particularly in the two polarised regions noted above: Western Ukrainians (Galicia and Volhynia) voted over 90% for Yushchenko; the far east over 90% for Yanukovych; Crimea 81.4% for Yanukovych, and Sevastopol 88.8%. The election demonstrated a fatal divide in Ukrainian society, a lack of middle ground, and heralded the uncertain developments of the future. One cannot examine the 2010 election in the same way because of the deep divisions within the pro-Western, pro-European camp: former president Yushchenko thus campaigned against his former Prime Minister Tymoshenko.

In 2014, on the other hand, electoral politics were simplified and altered fundamentally by the events of the Euromaidan. Two elections were held in this year: the May 25 presidential elections and the October 26 parliamentary elections. Both were affected by protests and the continuing conflict. Crimea did not participate and only about 20% of voters in Donetsk and Luhansk could take part because of restrictions imposed by separatist leaders. The former president, Yanukovych, had been expelled from the ranks of Regions, which was represented by the ineffectual Mykhailo Dobkin, and Symonenko once again headed the Communists. Petro Poroshenko, a compromise candidate for the pro-Euromaidan factions, won convincingly with 54% of votes in the first round. His nearest challenger was Yulia Tymoshenko, recently released from prison, with 12%. Dobkin received just over 3%; Symonenko 1.5%. Their votes, on the other hand, were well above those of far right candidates Oleh Tyahnybok (Svoboda) and Dmytro Yarosh (Right Sector) at 1.16% and 0.7%, respectively (Centralna Vyborcha Komisija, 2014).

The same pattern continued in the parliamentary elections, except that the Petro Poroshenko Bloc and the People's Front, the parties led by the President and Prime Minister (Arsenii Yatsenyuk), dominated the vote almost equally. Together with the third-placed party – the Self-Reliance group, led by former Lviv mayor Andrii Sadovyi – they controlled 244 seats out of 450 in the assembly. The Opposition Bloc, led by Yurii Boyko, won 29 seats with a popular vote of less than 1.5 million (Tvi.ua, 2014). Boyko is a native of Horlivka, one of the Donetsk regional mining towns at the very centre of the conflict in the East. The elections marked the formation of a new pro-Western coalition in Ukraine, indicating that the Donbas has ceased to play a pivotal role in Ukraine, for the first time in the history of the independent state. Moreover, of all the regions of Ukraine, it has suffered the most, economically and socially, as a result of the war and conflicts on its territory. A mass exodus of population occurred in the second half of 2014, with over 1 million people choosing or forced to migrate to other regions, mostly to the Russian Federation, though there has been a population decline since 2004 (Ridna Kraina, 2014; Sakwa, 2015).

There are a number of different ways to interpret the recent voting habits in Ukraine. On the one hand – the view adopted by many Western analysts – they appear to give Ukraine a green light to sever all ties with the Soviet period and start a new pro-Western and pro-democratic path that will take it, irrevocably, out of the Russian orbit (RRI, 2014). The main parties in the parliament may disagree on the attitude to be adopted towards the larger neighbour: whether one of compromise, as suggested by Poroshenko, or of confrontation, the attitude manifested during the elections last October by Yatsenyuk. There is little disagreement, however, on overall policy, which to some extent has been catalysed by the hostile attitude of Moscow, though Russian president Vladimir Putin did recognise the

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legitimacy of the presidential elections and the ascendancy of Poroshenko.

A second way to view events, and one adopted by a minority of Western analysts as well as Russia and its spokespersons, is that Ukraine experienced a right-wing coup from February 2014 that removed a legally elected president and established a new regime – scornfully described as a ‘junta’ – and that Western agencies funded these events as a means to remove Ukraine from all Russian influence.[3] Further, there have been allegations that the ‘coup’ resulted in a general assault on Russian-language speakers in Ukraine, necessitating the Russian annexation of Crimea, which in any case simply righted a historical wrong perpetrated by the Soviet leadership in 1954. Russia has not recognised the new regimes in the east of Ukraine (DNR and LNR), but it has supported them with weapons and personnel, and essentially prevented their destruction, despite a variety of rifts within the respective leaderships and a manifest lack of policies and infrastructure. In this way, Russia is responding to Western aggression.

A third interpretation may be closer to the truth than either of the first two. It is that, in 1991, the issue of state formation had hardly been broached, and that Ukraine made progress in fits and starts, but without a clear conception of the nation, its past, and where it lay in the geopolitical space between Russia and the West. That space became more contested after the eastward expansion of the EU in 2004, which brought former Communist states and former Soviet republics into that entity for the first time. Ukraine at that time became the new frontier. The Russian side had attempted to create several integrationist formations and the Russian president took an active interest in Ukrainian elections. The differences became particularly acute under Yushchenko because of his overtly pro-Western stance, and also because of his efforts to build a new nation on the exploits of anti-Soviet heroes such as OUN leader Stepan Bandera and UPA leader Roman Shukhevych, whom he made ‘heroes of Ukraine’ (Snyder, 2010).

For Russia, on the other hand, the danger appeared to be minimal for most of the post-Soviet period. Neither Kravchuk nor Kuchma could be described as anti-Russian; both presidents were primarily concerned with domestic issues and improving the economy. Though Yushchenko and the colour revolution caused great concern in the Kremlin, the victory of Yanukovych, an old ally, in the 2010 presidential elections brought hope that Ukraine might finally be a partner, alongside Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, in the new Customs Union. Corruption in Ukraine was among the highest of any country in Europe, thus destabilising the country, and Ukraine was dependent on Russia for imports of oil and gas. Russia could anticipate the monopolisation of power by Yanukovych for years to come, somewhat along the lines of Aleksander Lukashenko in Belarus – at times unpredictable, but clearly an ally. That confidence was dispelled by the events that followed a meeting between Putin and Yanukovych in Moscow just prior to the EU summit in Vilnius in November 2013.

The elections of 2014 affirmed the success of Euromaidan, but also weakened Ukraine in a number of ways. They demonstrated that the multi-vectored foreign policy of Kuchma is no longer feasible. Ukraine has chosen its direction by removing its far eastern regions from the centre of power. Even without Russian intrusions, the Donbas would have been disaffected. From almost complete control over Ukraine, it is now isolated and alienated. And it is impossible to return to the past. Crimea may be lost for many years – no Ukrainian leader has come up with a strategy to facilitate its return. Thus, the elections mark the emergence of Ukraine as a truncated state, without key industrial regions. And while Euromaidan was popular among about half of the population, and especially those under 50, it has rendered the future more uncertain time than any before in the 23 years of the independent state. Moreover, the turnout in October 2014 was the lowest of any recent election at 52%, and an estimated 50% of those who had voted formerly for the Party of Regions or the Communist parties did not take part (The Economist, 2014).

Is Ukraine more united today than in the past? It is difficult to answer definitively. One can suggest that voters are prepared to give President Poroshenko an opportunity to lead the country. They are concerned about the conflict, but are preoccupied even more with the economic situation, job security, and standards of living (Esipova and Ray, 2014). The plethora of political parties has been a feature of Ukrainian elections since 1991. Other than the Party of Regions and formerly the Communists, none has wielded massive political or economic influence. Yatsenyuk’s Popular Front, for example, which gained the highest overall percentage of votes in 2014, was a completely new formation, as was, for that matter, the Petro Poroshenko Bloc (Tvi.ua, 2014). Voters in Ukraine do not have firm alliances or party identities. They are concerned more with individual leaders and the list of candidates that is

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supplied by each party prior to each election. There has also been uncertainty concerning the division of powers between the president and the parliament, though most presidents – and particularly Yanukovich – easily circumvented constitutional issues to wield more power. Today, as in Russia, it is the president's own party that has most seats in Parliament, despite finishing only second in terms of percentages of the vote.

The future of Ukraine remains uncertain because of the precarious state of the economy and the relative fragility of the new ruling coalition. Control over elections by a corrupt leader and his minions ended violently and contentiously. Ukraine appears to have embraced democracy, however, and its elections have always been more open and honest than those of its former Soviet neighbours, like Belarus and Russia. The most pro-Russian regions have either been added to Russia or else remain in conflict. The Soviet legacy that affected and influenced earlier elections is now, like the statues of Lenin, consigned to memory, but the new leaders will need to make broader appeals to the electorate than has been the case hitherto. Ultimately, even without the full return of the Donbas to Ukraine, the electorate is centrist rather than rightist; and prefers compromise to confrontation. It remains fearful, justifiably, of further Russian encroachment, but is wary of the impact of closer association with an EU that appears, likewise, uncertain whether to fully embrace its new partner.

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[1] Incidentally, the former Prime Minister, Nikolay Azarov, claimed in that there were over 20 million Russians in Ukraine! See: http://lb.ua/news/2012/06/26/158078_azarov_naschital_ukraine_20 mln.html

[2] On the other hand, Kolomoisky remains a controversial figure, and there are reports that a confrontation between him and Poroshenko is distinctly possible in the near future. See: <http://rian.com.ua/analytics/20141129/360126913.html> (Accessed: January 11, 2015).

[3] The most obvious example here is the RT network, which has cited, inter alia, the comments of ousted president Yanukovich. See: <http://rt.com/news/yanukovich-statement-ukraine-crimea-074/> (Accessed: January 11, 2015).

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