

# Elections in Ukraine, Belarus advance Russian plans for empire

by Konstantin George

The Moscow plan for moving in stages toward a formal restoration of the Russian Empire is now fully operational after the July 10 runoff presidential elections in Ukraine and Belarus. In both cases, the victors, Aleksandr Lukashenko in Belarus, and Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine, had campaigned to varying degrees on a platform of economic and political reintegration with Russia.

Lukashenko, a career Communist Party agricultural functionary turned populist, who won with a landslide 80% of the vote, went on record during the campaign calling for Belarus to reunite with Russia as part of the creation of a "new union" of the former Soviet republics. Kuchma, reflecting the fact that he won with 52% of the vote against strong Ukrainian nationalist opposition, has, at least in public, displayed more moderate tones. He has called for a Russia-Ukraine "Economic Union," but has carefully avoided publicly emulating the demands from Belarus for a formal "new union." The Ukrainian nationalist opposition with which he still must contend, rallied around defeated incumbent President Leonid Kravchuk, who, though not liked by Ukrainian patriots, was seen by them as the lesser of two evils.

## The shock therapy factor

Voter demand for an end to the economic breakdown crisis, and the belief that a change at the top will bring economic betterment, determined the election outcomes in both Ukraine and Belarus. In both republics, but especially in Ukraine, shock therapy through hyperinflationary price liberalization amidst ever-shrinking real production, has collapsed living standards to unbearable levels. By early July, average industrial wages in Ukraine were, at \$10 a month, about one-tenth of the average Russian industrial wage, and this juxtaposed to prices not much lower than those prevailing in Russia. The post-independence western policy of insisting on shock therapy for Moscow's Slavic republic neighbors thus bears primary responsibility for the ending of Belarus independence in effect, and the acute threat to the future independence of Ukraine.

Kuchma exploited this situation to the hilt in the Ukrainian election. While never saying what he would do, except offer an "Economic Union" with Russia, he stressed that the

only election issue is the economy. He also rubbed in the sad but true fact that Ukraine has to date received almost nothing from the West, basically telling voters that therefore Ukraine had no choice but to integrate with Russia, as the only alternative to further economic collapse.

In contrast, Kravchuk made the fatal blunder of not addressing the economy in his campaign, despite the fact that he did stand up for Ukrainian statehood and undiluted national sovereignty, correctly warning that a Kuchma victory would open the door to a new period of Russian colonial rule. It is a testimony to the strength and resilience of Ukrainian patriotism, especially in the nation's western regions, that Kravchuk was able to poll 46% of the national vote, despite ignoring the issue of the economy, amidst an economic holocaust where 80-90% of Ukrainians are living below the poverty level. However, by failing to offer even the prospect of a second term that would put "bread on the table," Kravchuk doomed himself and, potentially, his nation.

There were several ironies in both the Kuchma victory and his successful exploitation of the overriding issue of the economy. Kuchma conveniently ignored the fact that he himself, as prime minister in 1992 and 1993, bore much of the responsibility for the physical breakdown of the Ukrainian economy. The Communist Party *nomenklatura* apparatus behind his candidacy had, together with western financial interests and Moscow, systematically plundered and sabotaged the Ukrainian economy for their own enrichment during Ukraine's first years as an independent nation. Amidst the slogans of "economic union" with Russia, it was forgotten that much of the shock therapy that wrecked Ukraine was, given the economic interdependence with Russia, imported via the shock therapy policies of Russia. Also forgotten was the enormous havoc in the Ukrainian economy caused by the Moscow policy of drastic energy price hikes and periodic energy cutoffs and delivery slowdowns.

While the voter protest against economic misery put Kuchma within reach of victory, that factor alone did not put him over the top. What increased his vote from somewhere around 46-49%, up to the 52% of the vote he got, was a highly organized voter mobilization by the Communist Party apparatus in the eastern and southern Ukrainian industrial regions,

and in all rural areas of eastern, southern, and central Ukraine.

The significance of this mobilization, which included handouts and gifts at polling places, becomes clear when one compares the results of the runoff with the first round election held on June 26. In the first round, Kravchuk got 37% of the vote, while Kuchma received only 31%. Most notable in round one was the turnout difference between the "pro-Kravchuk," or anti-Kuchma, strongholds in western Ukraine, and the Kuchma strongholds in eastern and southern Ukraine. In western Ukraine, where Kravchuk received 85-90% of the vote, there was a turnout of 80%, juxtaposed to a national average of some 65%. The turnout in the eastern regions like Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv was little more than 60%.

After June 26, the Kuchma camp knew that they could only win the runoff by decisively increasing the turnout in the pro-Kuchma eastern and southern regions. They had to assume that the high voter turnout in western Ukraine and resulting advantage to Kravchuk would persist in round two. The second round results confirmed this, with again about 80% voter turnout in western Ukraine and incredibly high Kravchuk majorities, reaching as high as 94% in the Lviv region. The huge rise in voter participation in round two, which was at about 75% compared to some 65% in round one, reflected the Communist apparatchik machinery's "get out the vote" drive. The bulk of the increase was in the regions where Kuchma was strong, and this increase put him over the top.

Kuchma also benefitted from a form of campaign advertising which in any western country would have produced a serious international crisis. The Kuchma campaign bought large amounts of time on Ostankino, the central Russian television station that broadcasts throughout the former Soviet Union. One could imagine what hell would break loose if, say, in the current German national election campaign, paid ads of Helmut Kohl's opponent, Rudolf Scharping, were beamed daily into Germany from French, Austrian, and Swiss television. In Ukraine, part of the former Soviet Union, such an outrage, sadly, went unchallenged by the Kravchuk regime in Kiev.

### The 'Belarus card'

In contrast to Ukraine, the Belarus outcome was already decided in round one held on June 23. Aleksandr Lukashenko received 45% of the vote, outstripping by far all his opponents. His nearest opponent, Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich, received only 17%. The two candidates who campaigned in favor of stopping a union with Russia, Zenon Poznyak, head of the Belarus Popular Front, and Stanislav Shushkevich, the ex-chairman of the Belarus Parliament who was deposed by Parliament in January for his opposition to union with Russia, received only 13% and 9% of the vote, respectively. Besides the certainty of the outcome, the runoff was also superfluous regarding the question of a new union with Russia. Both runoff candidates, Lukashenko and Keb-

ich, held nearly identical positions on this issue.

The secret to the Lukashenko landslide victory, however, had little to do with the question of union with Russia. Unlike Ukraine, which has a large and active pro-independence constituency, Belarus never had a large mass movement that fought for independence, and the majority of the population was always, at best, indifferent to independence.

Lukashenko won because he succeeded in convincing the population, whose standard of living has been ruined, that he was the anti-*nomenklatura* candidate. He vowed he would wage war on the "mafia" and "corruption," and would "restore order." He also successfully campaigned against free market economic policies, which have been responsible for the country's economic misery. The mood of revolt against the *nomenklatura* produced the striking defeat of Kebich, who did even worse in round two, with only some 13% of the vote. Kebich accepted the consequences and on July 11 resigned as prime minister, followed a day later by his entire cabinet. The support for free market policies has destroyed the "reformist" Popular Front.

Following the victory of Lukashenko, the only question now is the timing of the moves toward reuniting Belarus with Russia. However this is tactically handled and coordinated between Moscow and Minsk, each step will be managed from the standpoint of its usefulness in drawing Ukraine back into the Russian orbit. In short, Moscow will play the "Belarus card" it controls so as to best shift the Ukrainian situation in its favor. As Lukashenko stressed during the campaign, he sees "union" with Russia as the stepping stone to the unification of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus into a single state. His election and that of Kuchma have given Moscow its first solid victories toward formally creating a "Slavic Union" of these three former Soviet republics, as the intended Slavic core of a new Russian Empire.

For Ukraine, the election result will increase the already deep political cleavage between the Russia-leaning east and the pro-independence strongholds in the west. The partition danger is strong, but by no means inevitable. One cannot extrapolate from election results to predict partition. Much will depend on what Kuchma does as President, concerning the content and speed of his proposed "union" with Russia. Of greater significance is what he does concerning the economy. Here he faces an interesting dilemma. The existence of significant popular support for integration with Russia has been a political function of the Ukrainian economic collapse. Were Kuchma to start turning the economy around, he could jeopardize the basis of support for his plan to re-enter the Russian orbit.

On the other hand, if nothing is done to reverse the economic collapse, a political crisis will ensue, as the industrial east and south are beset by economic desperation and the west begins to consider any option, including secession, to escape coming again under the rule of Moscow, in whatever guise recolonization may take.