

From Autonomy to Independence: Evolution of Ukrainian Political Thoughts

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Abstract

Many analyses and studies have been conducted on the causes of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine in 1991. However, there is still a view of Ukrainian independence as a historical coincidence. This article reviews Ukrainian political ideas of freedom, separation and independence that have developed in Ukrainian society for years and proves that the independence of Ukraine in 1991 is the long-standing political aspiration of Ukrainians. Starting with Pylyp Orlyk's first constitution in Ukraine, this study analyzes various historical records, documents and political claims. Through this analysis, this study attempts to show how the political ideology of Ukraine has been developed from the 17th century. In the end, this study explains that Ukrainians have been oriented towards liberalism, autonomy, democracy and federalism, and in the early 20th century, the idea of complete separation from Russia was established.

Keywords: Ukrainian political thoughts, liberalism, autonomy, Independence, Federalism

ВІД АВТОНОМІЇ ДО НЕЗАЛЕЖНОСТІ: ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ УКРАЇНСЬКИХ ПОЛІТИЧНИХ ДУМОК

Соргу Гонг

Анотація

Про причини розпаду Радянського Союзу та незалежності України в 1991 році йдеться у багатьох розвідках та дослідженнях. Однак досі існує погляд на українську незалежність як на історичний збіг обставин. У цій статті розглянуто українські політичні ідеї свободи, відокремлення та незалежності, які склалися в українському суспільстві роками, і доведено, що незалежність України у 1991 році є давнім політичним прагненням українців. Починаючи з Першої Конституції Пилипа Орлика в Україні, це дослідження аналізує різні історичні записи, документи та політичні вимоги. За допомогою цього аналізу у статті намагаємося показати, як була розроблена політична ідеологія України. Урешті-решт, це дослідження пояснює, що українці були орієнтовані на лібералізм, автономію, демократію та федералізм, і на початку 20 століття утвердилася ідея повного відокремлення від Росії.

Ключові слова: українські політичні думки, лібералізм, автономія, незалежність, федералізм

This study aims to examine the origins, developments, and influences of the political thought for freedom, democracy and independence in Ukraine. Although the Ukrainian independence in 1991 was suddenly realized without preparation, Ukrainian people's demand for independence had already begun in the 17th century during the Cossack era.

In the process of disintegration of the Soviet Union, whether or not the Ukrainian Republic would leave the Union had a great impact on the fate of U.S.S.R. The Ukrainian Republic's referendum for independence held on December 1, 1991 further accelerated the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Even after the Soviet Union was disintegrated, Ukraine came into conflicts with Russia over issues such as hegemony within the Commonwealth of Independent States, the naval fleet of the Black Sea, the repayment of foreign debts, and the possession of nuclear weapons. The ever-intensifying conflicts in the Ukraine-Russia relationship served as a factor endangering the future of two countries.

So why did the Ukrainians demand independence from the Soviet Union? Where and when did their political arguments begin? What historical background is behind their political demands? These questions were the motivation for this study.

The beginning of the disputed relationship between Ukraine and Russia dates back to the signing of the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654. In this treaty, Khmelnytsky signed an oath of unilateral allegiance to the Muscovite tsar. In the first place, Khmelnytsky expected an oath from both sides. In Khmelnytsky's point of view, this treaty was the promise of Muscovite to protect the Ukrainians from Poland and respect Ukrainians' rights and privileges in exchange for the Ukrainian people's pledge of loyalty to the tsar. However, Muscovite's representative Buturlin refused to swear in the name of the monarch, arguing that unlike the Polish king, the tsar was the absolute ruler and that swearing to his servants would reduce his dignity. Fearing of losing the tsar's aid, Khmelnytsky accepted the conditions without tsar's oath. The interpretation of the Treaty of Pereyaslav, which later united the two countries together, became the subject of frequent controversy among scholars. The problem is complicated by the fact that the original document is lost, and only inaccurate copies and translations remain. (Subtelny, 1993, pp. 134-35)

After the Treaty of Pereyaslav, many Cossack Hetmans tried to revert to pre-treaty conditions and break the unequal relationship between Ukraine and Russia. One of them was Ivan Mazepa, who persuaded King Charles XII of Sweden to fight against Russia in Poltava, Ukraine. In this battle aimed at liberation and independence from Russia, Mazepa and his Cossack army were defeated and had to flee to Bendery in Moldova. After Ivan Mazepa died there, Pylyp Orlyk was elected to the new Hetman. Orlyk was the first non-Ukrainian to become the Cossack Hetman, a respected figure who devoted his entire life and wealth to the anti-Russian movement and the restoration of Ukrainian autonomy. One of his greatest achievements is that he established the first constitution of Ukraine. Orlyk's constitution, which began by referring to Hetman as the guardian of the Eastern Orthodox Church, emphasizes the need to establish a liberal and democratic system.

The Constitution consists of 16 articles and deals with all aspects of Ukrainian life at the beginning of the eighteenth century. (Pritsak, 1998, pp. 471) Especially, article 6, concerning the administration of the state and its parliamentary system, criticizes the cases of illegal abuse of power in the past, and explains that it is necessary to prevent the concentration of power systematically. Article 6 also suggests that the General Officers, the General Council, and the General Court be run separately. Particularly emphasizing the need for independence of the judiciary, Article 10 emphasizes that Hetman cannot use his power for personal revenge, and that the punishment of all crimes must be decided by the courts, not Hetman. ("The Bendery Constitution," 1996, pp. 62-63) It also emphasizes that the election of Hetman and other high-ranking positions must be made through fair elections: "Therefore, let it be solemnly resolved that His Highness the Hetman must not be guided by any gifts and favors and must not appoint anyone to the rank of colonel or other military or civil office in return for a bribe, nor assign anyone arbitrarily to these positions, that both military and civil officers, especially colonels, must be elected by a free vote and after the election, be confirmed by the Hetman's authority" ("The Bendery Constitution," 1996, pp. 62-63)

Orlyk's constitution, declared in 1710, clearly opposes autocracy and emphasizes the separation of political power to prevent it. Articles 6 and 7 of the Constitution address the necessity of dividing power into the executive,

legislative and judiciary, and specifically explain that within the executive branch, Hetman's staff should play a role in limiting his power. From the fact that almost 40 years later Baron de Montesquieu insisted on the separation of powers in his writing “The Spirit of Law” in 1740, we can see how democratic and advanced Orlyk's constitution was. That principle was adopted in the U.S. Constitution, likewise with legislative, executive and judicial branches. Separation of powers was also a feature of the April 1918 Constitution of the Ukrainian People's Republic. (Sorokowski, 2010, p. 7)

Political claims such as autonomy and democracy in Orlyk's constitution were revived by the national awakening of Ukrainian intellectuals, influenced by Enlightenment and romantic nationalism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. *Istoriia Rusov*, an important document of Ukrainian political thought, appeared in the late 18th or early 19th century. This document describes how Ukrainian history has developed from the past to 1769, focusing mostly on the periods of the Cossacks, Bohdan Khmelnytsky, and the Hetman state. The underlying principle of *Istoriia Rusov* is that “each nation has a natural, moral, and historical right to an independent political development.” (Ohloblyn, 2003) The main theme of *Istoriia Rusov* is the struggle of the Ukrainian nation against Russian or Polish domination. Rather than presenting objective historical facts, *Istoriia Rusov* describes history that the author believed it should have been. *Istoriia Rusov* was extremely popular at that time and had a strong influence on the development of Ukrainian historiography in the 19th century. Also, Mykola Markevych, Yevhen Hrebinka, Izmail Sreznevsky, Nikolai Gogol, Amvrosii Metlynsky, Mykola Kostomarov, Panteleimon Kulish, and, above all, Taras Shevchenko wrote their historical-literary works based on *Istoriia Rusov*. (Ohloblyn, 2003)

Ukrainian political thought took a step forward with the formation of the Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood in 1845. With 12 intellectuals including Mykola Kostomarov, Taras Shevchenko and Panteleimon Kulish, this society envisioned **national autonomy within a free and equal Slavic Federation**. In such a political system, Russia is not a dominant nation, but one of the Slavic nations with equal freedom and opportunity. Rather, the society envisioned that Kyiv would lead the free democratic federal system as the center of the entire Slavic Federation. The society aimed to **abolish serfdom, spread public**

education, and realize basic liberal democratic principles, such as freedom of speech, thought and religion.

The political ideas and goals of this society are well represented in Mykola Kostomarov's "The Books of Genesis of the Ukrainian Nation":

“108. ... Ukraine will rise from her grave and again will call to her brother Slavs, and they will hear her call and the Slavic peoples will rise and there will remain neither tsar, nor tsarevich, nor tsarevna, nor prince, nor count, nor duke, nor excellency, nor highness, nor lord, nor boyar, nor peasant, nor serf, neither in Great Russia, nor in Poland, nor in Ukraine, nor in Czechia, nor among the Khorutans, nor among the Serbs, nor among the Bulgars.

109. And Ukraine will be an independent Republic in the Slavic Union. Then all the peoples, pointing to that place on the map where Ukraine will be delineated, and say: behold, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” (Kostomarov, 1996, p. 100)

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Volodymyr Antonovych made a fundamental contribution to the development of Ukrainian political thought. Born in the Polish gentry (*szlachta*) of Right-Bank Ukraine, he rejected his Polish nationality and social class by criticizing and reflecting on the oppression of the Polish people against the Ukrainians. In his essay, Antonovych accused the Poles: “Either one was to love the people among whom one lived, become imbued with its interests, ... compensate the people for the evil done to it,” or leave Ukraine for lands inhabited by ethnic Poles to avoid being labelled “a colonist and a planter.” (Antonovych, 1995, pp. 113-114)

Antonovich insisted on **anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism** through his numerous books. Although he was known as a **populist** historian who denied the role of the elite ruling class and represented the interests of Ukrainian peasants. According to Bohdan Klid, he was not an anti-statist. He postulated the possibility of the existence of **a federal multinational state that would guarantee universal rights and defend the equality of its citizens and nations**. (Klid, 1999, p. 386) However, it is true that Antonovych's attitude

toward the formation of an independent Ukrainian state was also ambivalent. For Antonovych and other Ukrainian populists, the ideas of wide-ranging democracy and social equality of the historical Ukrainian communes (like *hromada*) served as a source of inspiration and guide for their activities as leaders of and participants in the Ukrainian national movement. Therefore, he is recognized as the founder of the “**national-democratic conception**” in Ukrainian history. (Klid, 1999, p. 387)

Mykhailo Drahomanov, a disciple of Antonovych, made a big mark in the development of the history of Ukrainian political thought in the late 19th century. At the time, when radical socialism and communism had an influence on Ukrainian political ideology, Drahomanov referred to himself as a socialist, taking a different position from other radical socialists and Marxists. He rejected Marxism, especially materialist interpretation of history and insisted that Ukrainian socialism must be oriented towards the peasantry. (Rudnytsky, 1984) His motivation for socialism was ethical and concern for social justice as well as underprivileged and exploited people. Drahomanov considered civil rights and free political institutions more important than class struggles. He also demanded gradual social reform rather than a radical socialist revolution and believed that social reform must be done with the liberation of the oppressed nation. (Rudnytsky, 1984)

Regarding the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, Drachomanov accused Russia of losing its freedom and democratic system after the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654:

No wonder that, during the years when Ukraine was united to Muscovy, with its autocratic tsar and legal serfdom and non-existent education, Russian despotism gradually brought about the destruction of Ukraine's freedom. Moscow's boyars helped reintroduce serfdom in Ukraine, while education and enlightenment were halted, all the more since the few educated Ukrainians were scattered over the whole of the new empire. A wall of statist and bureaucratic despotism was erected to prevent the free political ideas then current in Europe, while Ukraine had always welcomed, from penetrating. Even if the Ukrainian people had been able to stage an uprising against the increasing enslavement of

their own country, they would have met with opposition not only from those among their compatriots who benefited from serfdom, but also from the Russian government, its army, and even the Russian people, who regarded disobedience to 'our Tsar' as treason on the part of the Ukrainians. (Drahomanov, 1996, pp. 160-161)

In his article "Draft Constitution for the Ukrainian Society in the Free Union", Drahomanov also proposed a constitutionalist system to replace the Romanov dynasty in Russia. He criticized Russia for what caused Ukraine to suffer but did not insist that Ukraine be completely separated from Russia and developed into an independent state. Rather, he seems to have turned Russia into a democratic constitutional system and sought to find Ukraine's autonomy within it. (Drahomanov, 1996, pp. 171-183) He even supported anarchism or autonomy under the influence of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, a French socialist political thinker, so it seems he preferred to turn imperial Russia into a federal state made up of local autonomous governments. His views have affected many contemporaneous Ukrainian intellectuals, which slowed the claim for complete independence of Ukraine.

Political thoughts and arguments for Ukraine's complete independence from Russia were presented in 1900 by Mykola Mikhnovsky. Michnovsky studied law at the University of Kyiv, and as a student he was a founding member of the Taras Shevchenko Brotherhood (*Bratstvo Tarasivtsiv*). At Shevchenko's anniversary in Poltava and Kharkiv in 1900, he addressed the need for independence of Ukraine. Later his speech was printed in L'viv under the title "*Samostiina Ukraïna*" and became the political goal of the Ukrainian Revolutionary Party (*Revoliutsiina ukraïns'ka partiia*, or RUP). The following is the text of "Independent Ukraine:

"... We declare that what rightfully belongs to us but was taken away by force we accordingly will take back by force. Our nation has long been misled, but today it rises to the struggle. This first step towards achieving total freedom will be the Pereyaslav Constitution.....As long as even one enemy foreigner remains in our territory, we have no right to lay down our weapons. Let us remember that glory and triumph is the

destiny of fighters for the people's cause. Forward! May every one of us remember that when he fights for the people, he must care for the entire nation, in order that they not perish as a result of his carelessness. Forward! we cannot place our hope in anyone else or look back.”
(Mikhnovsky, 1900, pp. 214-215)

On March 4, 1917, when the collapse of the Russian Empire was imminent and a revolutionary situation unfolded, Ukrainian intellectuals founded the All-Ukrainian council named Ukrainian Central Rada. Central Rada united all political, public, cultural and professional organizations of Ukraine and directed the Ukrainian national movement.

When the revolution broke out in October 1917, the Bolsheviks of Petrograd overthrew the Russian Provisional Government. Under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, the Bolsheviks gained control over most of Russia's territory except Ukraine. Ukraine's Central Rada remained neutral and critical of the Bolshevik coup. However, on November 10-13, 1917, when a battle broke out in Kiev between the Bolshevik forces and the military organizations supporting the Provisional Government, Central Rada supported the Bolsheviks. Central Rada's strategy was to maintain relations with the Bolsheviks on the one hand, while attaining independence on the other. Therefore, on November 12, 1917, the Central Rada elected the highest executive unit in harmony with the leftist, taking into account relations with the Bolsheviks. At the same time, on November 20, 1917, the creation of the Ukrainian National Republic was declared. Through this declaration, the new General Secretariat of the Central Rada also guaranteed freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly, announced a political amnesty, and decreed that land was to be socialized without compensation. In addition, the Declaration made it possible for workers to have control over the workplace and stated that production was controlled by the state and that minorities were guaranteed autonomy. However, the Bolsheviks, who were unable to recognize the establishment of the Ukrainian National Republic, went through a lengthy war with the Central Rada between 1917 and 1921. (Markus & Stebelsky, 1993)

As the fate of the Ukrainian National Republic stood at a crossroads, the leaders of the Central Rada needed a peace treaty with their allies and

considered that military cooperation with Germany was the only way to save the UNR. According to European diplomatic principles at the time, only countries that were completely independent could pledge to international agreements such as peace treaties. Thus, on January 25, 1918, the Central Rada declared complete independence of Ukraine and signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with allies. The contents of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed through the 4th Universal are as follows:

By your strength, will, and word there has arisen in the Ukrainian land a free People's Republic. An age-old dream of your forefathers, champions of the freedom and rights of the toiling masses, has been realized.....Henceforth the Ukrainian People's Republic becomes an independent, free, and sovereign state of the Ukrainian people, subject to no one. We wish to live in peace and friendship with all the neighboring states: Russia, Poland, Austria, Romania, Turkey, and others; but none of them has the right to interfere in the life of the independent Ukrainian Republic. The Power in it shall belong only to the Ukrainian people, in whose name we, the Ukrainian Central Rada - the representatives of the toiling masses of the peasants, workers, and soldiers - will govern the country through our executive organ, which henceforth will be called the 'Council of People's Ministers.' ("The Fourth Universal of the Ukrainian Central Rada", 1996, pp. 243-244)

In 1710, the first constitution of the Cossacks was drafted by Orlyk, advocating autonomy and democracy, and about 208 years later Ukraine declared an independent state. The Ukrainian National Republic, which was born on January 25, 1918, was weakened through the ongoing civil war and war against Bolshevik army. Eventually, on March 18, 1921, the Treaty of Riga between Poland and the Bolsheviks led to the dissolution of the Ukrainian National Republic. Although the UNR was short-lived, Ukrainians' hopes, aspirations, and political claims for independence and freedom never disappeared and persisted throughout the Soviet period.

The Ukrainian nationalism remained strong even after Ukraine was annexed to the U.S.S.R. Ukrainians continued to clamor for nationalism amid unequal

brotherly relations between Ukraine and Russia. For example, when the German-Russian war broke out in June 1941, the Organization of Ukraine Nationalist (OUN) declared the Ukrainian independence in the German-occupied territory; and After Russia adopted the perestroika policy, the Ukrainian mass movement organization Rukh fought for democracy, holding Russia responsible for the famine in 1933 and the Chernobyl nuclear incident in 1986. The Rukh, in particular, won a quarter of deputies' seats in the elections to the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet held in March 1990 and led its independent political movement against the former communist force. The Uniates and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox church also intensified their struggle to legalize their churches before and after the 1988 millennium. These series of struggles are deemed to be diversified demonstrations of nationalism of Ukraine, which inherited the modern political thought of Ukraine. After all, the struggle for freedom, democracy, and independence, which continued during the Soviet period, was influenced by political thoughts that had developed from the 17th century. Ukraine's independence in 1991 was no coincidence, it was the realization of political aspirations that have persisted since the time of the Ukrainian Cossacks.

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