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The Geographical Problem of Political and Territorial Unity. The Reasons for Ukraine's Independence

When we lose the right to be different, we lose the privilege to be free.

Charles Evans Hughes

1. Foreword

Over the past three decades, a debate has been developing in the world over the dynamics and legitimacy of the fragmentation of state territorial space, its sovereignty and unitary character, i.e., those geographical elements that have dominated European and later world political organization since the end of the medieval age. This discussion has been stimulated especially by the collapse of the Soviet Empire. The proliferation of declarations of independence have forced many scholars of political philosophy, law, sociology, and international relations to see that the international order, composed of sovereign territorial states, believed to be immobile and eternal (according to the principles of *jus publicum europaeum*), was undergoing profound changes.

Marek Sobczykński has promoted over the course of two decades many international conferences and symposia, seminars and research meetings dedicated to the study of the consequences of these transformations for Political and Economic Geography. This extraordinary organizational and scholarly effort has studied the boundaries and transformations of modern territoriality, minorities, the dynamics of political and economic change in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, the problem of coherence between political and economic space, contemporary regionalism, transformations of transborder cooperation, the evolution of large regions, and border cities. Marek Sobczykński not only stimulated international debate on issues that are crucial to Geography and changing

territoriality, but also encouraged analysis of contemporary reality, with the aim of understanding and explaining what would happen in the near or more distant future. By promoting this vibrant and free exchange of ideas, he helped to create a large and active group of young people, pushing them into research and promoting, with extraordinary energy, cooperation among scholars from all over the world, who were also involved in educational trips to Central and Eastern Europe. In the focus of these international meetings and debates often ended up the question of changes in the institutional and territorial order, seen as the product of deep historical trends and political and geographical change. This has been particularly significant. On the one hand, the post-Soviet and in the former Yugoslav sphere independences were generally accepted (stimulating by contrast the attempt to suppress them by violence), on the other hand, a tendency continued to develop, including an academic one, oriented toward considering those political independences as temporary or even illegitimate.

This was particularly evident in the case of Ukraine, even though independence had gained more than 90 percent of the vote on December 1, 1991. The tendency to overlook the reasons for that independence, its historical motivations, the profound causes of the claim of self-rule, of deciding on one's own future, has led to misunderstanding both the complexity of that case and in general the deep dynamics that continue to unfold in a world mistakenly believed to be immobile and composed of rigid and unchangeable political-territorial realities.

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2. The reasons for Ukrainian independence

After the tragic events of 2013–2014 (the *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* street riots in Kiev, the escape of President Yanukovich, the annexation of Crimea to Russia, and the war in the Donbass), complex questions were raised about the nature, roots, and reasons for Ukrainian independence. In many sectors of international public opinion, the impression had arisen that, after all, that political independence, conquered in 1991, had lost its meaning and could therefore be called into question, not least because it was based on politico-territorial features that were the offspring of Soviet administrative subdivisions, retained when the new independent republic was built and transformed into modern, internationally recognized linear state boundaries. Even more so has this belief spread to Russia, where for cultural-historical reasons Ukrainian political independence has never

been fully understood, assimilated and accepted.¹ In doing so, however, it was forgotten that that independence had been gained in the course of the struggle and opposition to the Soviet regime, also conducted by the Russian Republic (RSFSR) under Yeltsin's leadership: a political entity that had become the main opponent of centralized Soviet power. Also has been obliterated the reality constituted by the sympathies of Russians – who in 1991, risking in person, had participated in the resistance to the August 19 coup-for the cause of nationalities² and for the reasons of their independence, after nearly a century of totalitarian tyranny.

The political, sociological, legal and philosophical studies devoted for many decades to the preconditions and concrete effects of political independencies (regardless of the reconstruction or building from the ground up of the type of aggregation that became independent), probe not only the political and economic consequences that independencies can produce (always a patchwork of exciting achievements and problems, some of them difficult to solve), but, significantly, also the preliminary reasons

¹ In the first half of the 1990s, the leaders of post-Soviet Russia admitted with difficulty that Ukraine could be an independent state – G. Lepesant, *L'Ukraine dans la nouvelle Europe*, Paris 2005, p. 23.

² Russians had already marched in Moscow in a May 1, 1990, counter-demonstration in favor of Lithuania's independence, proclaimed on March 10 of that year, with Lithuanian flags. As the cover of Goussard's book (A.-M. Goussard, *Des murs à abattre. Témoignage d'une militante engagée pour la liberté. Moscou, Vilnius, Kaliningrad, Jamba, Kiev*, Paris 2009) shows, with a photograph of that demonstration, now claimed never to have taken place by Kremlin propaganda. Significantly, the Russian Opposition often marched through the streets of Moscow under Ukrainian flags, in continuity with the tradition of the Russian intelligentsia of the 19th century (e.g., Herzen or Černichevsky), which had repeatedly spoken out in favor of the Ukrainian national cause, but also with the positions of early Bolshevism (however interested and tactically used) regarding nationality issues (E. Cinnella, 1917. *La Russia verso l'abisso*, Pisa 2017, ch. 20). Until 1935 the *Bol'shaja Sovetskaya Enciklopedija (per'voe izdanie)* described Bohdan Chmel'nitskij as a traitor to the Ukrainian national cause and the Act of Perejaslavl, of Ukraine's union with Russia, as "The legal act that began Russia's colonial domination over Ukraine" (quoted by: A. Avtorchanov, *Imperija Kremlja. Sovetskij tip kolonializma*, Vilnius 1990, p. 64). In later editions, the Encyclopedija reversed the judgment, describing that Act as "progressive" and the basis of Ukrainian cultural, economic and political development, keeping silent about denationalizing policies, the imposition of serfdom, and the ban on cultivating Ukrainian culture and language. Certainly, when the word that Ukraine would claim independence spread among the barricades in Moscow between August 19 and 21, as encouragement and incitement to resist came from the Baltic states, there swirled among those Russians not only an exaltation tinged with the giddiness of imminent system collapse, but also with creeping dismay. By the end of the short-lived "Spring of Russia" in the fall of 1993, acceptance of Ukrainian independence had been waning in Russian public opinion, while transversal forms of imperial neo-nationalism were rearing their heads, overwhelming with their activity the voice of that tradition.

for those processes that lead peoples aspiring to self-rule, to achieve self-government, succeeding in gaining it and undermining the grip of territorial political unity.

As was the case with other republics that ended up under the Soviet imperial yoke, the Ukrainian case falls into this typology. In other words, the problem is to understand when a group is legitimated to (re)gain independence because this has become indispensable for the protection and defense of its historical, socio-economic and cultural characteristics. When in particular it is a culture threatened by colonizers and dominators of various kinds,³ perhaps for centuries, the self-rule problem has been self-imposed and self-justified by its self-evidence.

Examining even just the history of the twentieth century, Ukraine suffered, much more intensely than the other former Soviet republics, an assimilationist onslaught unparalleled in human history and planned phenomena of “deportation-repopulation,” an ethnocultural dilution that transformed it into a new region subjected to the erosion of its original cultures. Ukrainian culture was compressed and marginalized as a result, as well as nationality, which as it is well known, derives from the interaction between subjective elements, perceptions and factually existing elements. The desperate postwar armed resistance against Soviet domination⁴ succeeded to a very marginal extent in signaling to the world the presence of domination, suffered and rejected, rooted in a long history of immense, incalculable damage to national cultural and linguistic heritage. The attack on Ukrainian identity, as elsewhere, has in fact passed through impressive practices of de-nationalization, devastation and erasure of national historical monuments, forced assimilation, cultural and linguistic, the main instrument of political domination, implemented through compulsory, homogeneous education, aimed at eradicating the memory of what of the historically occurred events it is too dangerous to publicize.

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³ See A. Buchanan, *Secession. The Morality of Political Divorce from Fort Sumter to Lithuania and Québec*, Boulder 1991, p. 15. Robert McGee also states, “One of the reasons why a group typically claims secession is to preserve a cultural identity, threatened by the country of which it is currently a part. The suppression of Lithuanian and Ukrainian cultures, perpetrated by the Soviets, is one example among many” – see R. McGee, *Ripensare la secessione*, [in:] C. Lottieri, N. Iannello (eds.), *Secessione. Una prospettiva liberale*, Brescia 2015, p. 113. Theoretically, even in the Ukrainian case it was not “secession”, but regaining an independence suppressed by violence (armed occupation, annexation) and deception by the Bolshevik power in 1919. Independence and liberation from an occupation perpetrated and maintained by violence shift the terms of the issue examined by contemporary secession theorists and make the motivations even stronger.

⁴ A. Rosselli, *La resistenza antisovietica e anticomunista in Europa orientale, 1944–1956*, Roma 2004.

Ukraine has possessed its own complex ethnocultural physiognomy for centuries, characterized by pluriethnicity, acceptance and tolerance, and by a formidable coexistence.⁵ The long rejection of compression within an imperial Procrustean bed is also rooted in this historical tradition.

The aspiration for independence and the tenacious struggle to regain and preserve it have always contained within themselves first and foremost manifest motivations of cultural and identity self-defense. The attack on identity has triggered the need to safeguard, by political means of protection, a threatened culture, since cultural belonging is fundamental to the lives of individuals. What has been done to Ukraine since 1795, in terms of the devastation of culture and language, constitutes a premise of the regaining of political independence as the only possible solution, since it falls fully within the typology of “rectification of past injustices”, contrary to the distinctions made by Allen Buchanan.⁶

Today we tend to forget for what reasons Ukraine had claimed and obtained independence, which remain valid today. Those reasons were very clear and consistent with the basic principles of political thought, international law, the Helsinki principles, which the Soviet Union also subscribed to in 1975, Article 72 of the Soviet Constitution concerning the right of *svobodnogo vychoda* (free exit from the Union) for the Republics⁷ and much more. As then, those reasons today are rooted in the USSR’s failed attempts at reform, though pursued for six years. The attempted authoritarian restoration of 1991 had been the last straw in a long history of subjugation, inexhaustible violence, centuries-old ethnocultural annihilation. To not acknowledge the right of men to free themselves from a tyrannical order that cannot otherwise be changed is to be a supporter of a *de facto* illegitimate regime. The failure to federalize the Union, which had increasingly become a stifling, rigidly verticalized unitary state led by the Party, the failure to rebuild it on a different basis, the difficulty of realizing Solzhenitsyn’s project on the federation of the three Union Slavic republics, and the reaction

⁵ See G. Potašenko (ed.), *The Peoples of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania*, Vilnius 2002. Independence also, in theory, encourages ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity suppressed over centuries of oppression.

⁶ A. Buchanan, *Secession...*, p. 114.

⁷ The principle of “free exit”, included in the Soviet Constitution of 1924, was later adopted by the Stalinist Constitution of 1936 and later by the Brezhnevian Constitution of 1977. It derived from consistency with the federal principle, also recognized by Lenin, according to which it would not be possible to speak of free and voluntary union if the right to secede was excluded – B. Nahaylo, V. Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion. A History of the Nationalities Problem in the U.S.S.R.*, New York 1990, pp. 31–35. Tragically and ironically, the accusation of wanting to use that right served in the repressive period of the ezovšina as a justification for arrests and deportations – A. Avtorchanov, *Imperija Kremlja...*, p. 154.

to the Union Treaty, which had provoked the 1991 coup in Moscow, had all been more than sufficient factors and reasons for claiming self-rule and political independence. Moreover, the reasons for independence were rooted and continue to be rooted in the truths about Ukrainian history that have been emerging over the years and have been discovered, even by ordinary people, popularized first thanks to *glasnost'* and then the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tragic realities, facts of Ukrainian history long consigned to forced oblivion by Soviet censorship, have gradually emerged and revealed themselves in all their terrifying magnitude. Indeed, for years, since 1985, a long history of Ukrainians' subjugation to both foreign domination and continuous prevarications, which occurred for centuries in the Soviet-Russian Empire, has surfaced from the fogs of the past and could be talked about openly: a long story punctuated by real historiographical discoveries, arising from documents and testimonies, from writings and memories of survivors. In other words, the discovery of shocking truths has also taken place in Ukraine—for example, about the Holodomor of 1932–1933, which resulted in 6 million deaths from starvation⁸ – revelations similar to that of the 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact Secret Protocols for the Baltic States, the disclosure of which was the cornerstone of independence.

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The reasons for political independence then extended to the recognition of the full viability of self-government and the possibility of thinking of it as an indispensable source of rebirth, after decades of devastation caused by the Soviet regime and from which the country has not yet recovered. Ukraine is the second largest European country after Russia. It is inhabited by 45 million people and thus is able to meet the widespread preconditions often deemed necessary for the implementation of political independence. It possesses immense economic potential, from agriculture⁹ to industry, despite the *de facto* secession of the Donbass, a key mining and industrial center for Ukraine, inhabited for centuries by Ukrainians but repopulated with other ethnic groups.

⁸ Ettore Cinnella described it as a vast operation designed to punish a people like the Ukrainians, who were rearing their heads and aspiring for independence – E. Cinnella, *Ucraina 1932–33. Il genocidio dimenticato*, Roma 2015, p. 294. Stalin's choice to use famine against Ukrainians resulted in the death of 25 percent of Ukraine's ethnic population and the simultaneous destruction of much of Ukraine's political and intellectual elite in the form of genocide. A. Graziosi, *L'Urss di Lenin e Stalin. Storia dell'Unione Sovietica, 1914–1945*, Bologna 2007, p. 361.

⁹ It is redundant to describe the immense potential of Ukraine's black lands, the *černozëm* (чернозём), among the most fertile and extensive in the world. The economic devastation of Ukraine and particularly those lands in the Soviet period (their productivity never recovered to pre-Revolutionary levels), which forced the Kremlin political class to import grain from abroad, was among the legitimate reasons for independence.

3. Historical reasons for independence. Ukraine under the Russian Empire

The claim of historical reasons for Ukrainian political independence (although history can often be used in a distorted way, depending on the varying political interests at stake), has long been rooted in the complex vicissitudes experienced by the peoples of the regions now part of the Ukrainian Republic. Invoking the history of Kievan Rus' (10th–13th centuries) to justify a kind of “historical right” of Muscovite Russia over Ukrainian regions, on the basis of twentieth-century geopolitical determinism and a Jacobin view of politics, is contradictory. First of all, because if the religious conversion of 988 and the formation of a center of Eastern Christian Orthodoxy are rooted in that remote history, as well as the sharing of a culture and the endless intersections between Ukrainians and Great Russians since that period (literary, historical, etc.) the plurinational and coexisting character of that extremely fluid, typically medieval political structure (a proto-federation of low-political aggregations, lacking political sovereignty over a homogeneous territory fenced by hard modern linear boundaries and lacking centralized power in the sense of a modern state, in which, in fact, the princes had diverse enemies, including those further east, considered to be the progenitors of Muscovy), precludes reference to it as a political unit that was the precursor of Muscovite Russia in a political-structural sense and as the progenitor of the Tsarist Empire.¹⁰ In fact, there was no dynastic, political, ecclesiastical continuity that would authorize Russia to attribute to itself the exclusive inheritance of Rus'¹¹ let alone a different physiognomy from the polyethnic conglomerate¹² that characterized it.

With regard to western Ukraine, then, the long history of belonging to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania,¹³ its assimilation of the culture that

¹⁰ On the impossibility of using this proto-federation as the basis of a pre-existing statehood for the Muscovite Empire (making a completely different political and cultural reality fall into a Procrustean bed of modern-state simplification) Kostomarov had already written fundamental pages in the 19th century. See: A. Franco, *Le due nazionalità della Rus'.* *Il pensiero di Kostomarov nel dibattito ottocentesco sull'identità ucraina*, Ariccia 2016.

¹¹ G. Lepesant, *L'Ukraine...*, p. 26. On the issue of Kievan Rus' legacy, see for a quick overview, A. Kappeler, *Kleine Geschichte der Ukraine*, München 2009, pp. 29–39.

¹² K. Boeck, E. Völkl, *Ucraina. Dalla rivoluzione rossa alla rivoluzione arancione*, Trieste 2009, p. 25.

¹³ As early as 1363, during the period of the reign of Algirdas (1363–1377), the Grand Duchy included Volynia (incorporated in 1352), Principality of Briansk (1355), Principality of Smolensk (1357), Principality of Kiev (1362), Podolia (1364) and lower Dnipro: that is,

prevailed there and the sharing of very different characteristics, in all respects,¹⁴ than those that will be assumed by Muscovite Russia, demonstrate the inconsistency of claims of a priori denial of self-government and those of Ukraine's alleged "natural belonging" to a certain predetermined political-territorial aggregation. The development of a late self-awareness of one's own ethnonational characteristics, with a delay due precisely to imperial rule, certainly cannot be used as a self-fulfilling prophecy, given that colonial assimilationism within the Empire sought to erase the original ethnocultural connotations, making one forget the presence of a specific culture that had been present in the region for centuries. In particular, the imposing peasant, Cossack, and Ukrainian intellectual components expressed original characteristics that were repressed for a very long time, up to the attempted Stalinist genocide of the Cossacks. Examples of

even before the Kievan Dynastic Union (1385), the beginning of four centuries of Polish-Lithuanian Confederation. From 1505 the Grand Duchy englobed almost all of present-day Ukraine, generating within it a fusion of different nobility and forms of extraordinary coexistence between different ethnic groups. See: G. Potašenko (ed.), *The Peoples...*; see also A. Eidintas, A. Bumblauskas, A. Kulakauskas, M. Tamošajtis, *Istorija Litvy*, Vilnius 2013; A. Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich Entstehung. Geschichte, Zerfall*, München 2001, and A. Kappeler, *Kleine Geschichte...*, pp. 102–105.

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¹⁴ Lithuanian influences on Ruthenian, Western Ukrainian society, subject to historiographical excavation today, have been innumerable. The most important ones, which differentiate this region from Muscovite Russia, are those related to the influence of the Renaissance, the echo of the Reformation, Magdeburg law (foreign to Muscovite Russia), but especially to individual farms, personal ownership of land (allodial), different from the forms of land management formed in the culture of the Eastern Slavs. These aspects are still recognizable in linguistic terms: in Ukrainian we still find Lithuanian words related to the reality of individual farms. Rooted in these diversities are the distant roots of the Ukrainian peasantry's tragic struggle against Stalinist forced collectivization and the dictator's genocidal and democidal reprisals (Holodomor), after a period of recovery that had allowed for a certain cultural and economic flourishing in agriculture. Regarding the diversity of political conceptions, the pages of the correspondence between Ivan IV and Prince Andrei Kurbsky, a refugee in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, remain emblematic – Ivan il Terribile, *Un buon governo nel regno. Carteggio con Andrej Kurbskij*, Milano 2000. A conception of politics opposite to the autocratic one developed in medieval Ukraine, which also renders the popular thesis, widespread especially in the United States, of "Slavic countries congenitally devoted to autocracy and absolute power," inconsistent – L. Pauwels, T. Pauwels, *Histoire d'Ukraine. Le point de vue ukrainien*, Fouenant 2015, p. 164. It would be enough to think of the *veche*, a popular assembly of Ukrainian cities (the best known case being the Republic of Novgorod), invested with supreme authority, comparable to the Nordic *Thing* or the Swiss *Landsgemeinde*. As early as the 15th century, Grand Duke Alexander of Lithuania granted Kiev considerable independence, according to the principles of the Magdeburg Law, a European code of municipal self-government, on the basis of which citizens could elect their own rulers and members of the judiciary. That Law remained in force in Kiev until 1834. The list of Lithuanian influences is very long.

this were the free institutions of the Cossacks,¹⁵ the *lichnaja svaboda* (individual freedom) and the importance of the individual, albeit embedded in the Cossack brotherhood, but above all the *federativnoe načalo* (federal principle), inherited from the political tradition of Kievan Rus', preserved for centuries in the Ukrainian political mentality. All cultural elements in sharp contrast to the autocratic principle of the Muscovite tsars, who were increasingly influenced by the model of the modern centralized unitary state, both of autocratic origin and, later, of Western provenience (Prussian, French, Swedish in the bureaucratic sphere, from Peter onward).¹⁶

In reality, moreover, from the historical point of view the real belonging of Ukraine to the Russian Empire dates only from 1795, with the partition of Poland and the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Confederation, which lasted, in different organizational forms, as many as four centuries and with the incorporation of the whole of present-day Ukraine into the Russian Empire (except Galicia, then considered, with a stretch, "the Piedmont of the Ukrainians"). The beginning of the territorial expansion of Muscovite Russia is to be traced back only to 1667, while since the end of Mongol rule only the southern Ukrainian territories belonged to Russia. Under the Tsarist Empire, assimilationist and homogenizing tendencies toward Ukrainians were massive and overwhelming. The mounting Great-Russian chauvinism drastically curtailed the Ukrainian ethnocultural and linguistic space, reducing it to a peripheral, dialectal, folkloric rank and considering it lacking originary and original cultural-historical connotations. During the 19th century there was a genuine imperial disdain for the rebirth of Ukrainian national self-consciousness, well epitomized by Nikolai Kostomarov's masterpiece, *Skotskij bunt (The Animal Uprising)*.¹⁷

In the 19th century, the imperial assimilationist strategy of the tsars sought to stifle the development of Ukrainian particularities in the bud: by seducing the local elites, russifying wherever possible, banning the use of the Ukrainian language, suppressing cultural institutes, libraries, independent educational institutions (all of which were considered litmus tests-in political thought prior to the French Revolution-for the presence of tyranny, recalling the natural right of resistance), introducing serfdom

¹⁵ K. Boeck, E. Völkl, *Ucraina. Dalla rivoluzione rossa...*, pp. 33–38; A. Kappeler, *Kleine Geschichte...*, pp. 54–71; K.S. Jobst, *Geschichte der Ukraine*, Stuttgart 2010, pp. 87–104.

¹⁶ A. Vitale, *Rossijskaja gosudarstvennost' v sravnitel'noj perspektive: russkaja tradicija i zapadnaja model' stroitel'stva gosudarstva*, "Novejšaja Istorija Rossii. Mezhdisciplinarnyj Nauchno-Teoreticheskij Zhurnal" 2013, no. 3, pp. 20–36.

¹⁷ M. Kostomarov, *La rivolta degli animali. Lettera di un proprietario terriero piccolo russo al suo amico di Pietroburgo*, Palermo 1993.

and suppressing the status of free peasants, taxing them to the point of exhaustion (another element of tyranny, justifying the claim of self-rule). The policies of Peter I and Catherine II suppressed a host of typical (and differentiating) features of Ukrainian culture, starting with the freedoms of the Cossacks, in the course of the colonization of the South.¹⁸ The result to be achieved was *divide et impera*: in fact, they succeeded in dividing Ukrainian society into the opposing camps of the nobility (co-opted into the Great-Russian *doorjanstvo*) and serfs. The expansion of autocracy also brought with it a rude and primitive conception of absolute sovereignty—as opposed precisely to the “proto-federal” tradition inherited from the Kievan Rus’ past—that would provide the foundations on which, in perfect Tocquevilian continuity, the Soviet state would build (assimilating from the autocratic period “in its pure state” i.e., without Western constitutional exceptions, all imitations of the modern Western state model), in a maximum and coherent evolution, that totalitarian state which was nothing less than an unprecedented concentration of political power, based on an exaggerated and continually looping production of internal political unity and enforced homogeneity, accompanied by disregard for national particularities.

210 It is well known that in the tsarist period, imperial assimilationism used very specific tools, which proved effective: 1) the seduction of non-Russian elites to make them co-participants in the local government, “by proxy”; 2) tendential Russification, which led to the suppression of the original Ukrainian cultural features, using the suppression of spontaneous schools, the prohibition of the use of the Ukrainian language,¹⁹ the suppression of Ukrainian national publications, the changing of place names, the transformation of the architectural heritage, assimilating it to that of Muscovite Russia, etc.; 3) the interdiction of the local elite from entering schools, academies, and universities; 4) the appointment to key posts in the imperial administration and institutions of elements trusted but mostly belonging to the titular ethnic group in the Empire; 5) a forced demographic change in several regions, with the stimulation of immigration from the East; 6) the use of violence, expulsions, deportations, and summary executions, albeit to an extent not even remotely comparable to those of the Soviet period, but with a kind of ante-litteram Jacobinism, practiced long before the 18th century, homogenizing and penalizing native populations (e.g. to the detriment of the Crimean Tatars and well before Stalin); 7) the introduction of serfdom with the expropriation of land and an overburdening of taxes; 8) the introduction of a multi-decade

¹⁸ K. Boeck, E. Völkl, *Ucraina. Dalla rivoluzione rossa...*, p. 36.

¹⁹ K.S. Jobst, *Geschichte der Ukraine*, p. 117.

military service, in imitation of the French model, starting in 1797, extremely burdensome for peasant families.

As early as 1720 the de-culturation that resulted from a decree of Peter I, had provided for the elimination of all Ukrainian linguistic elements from theological literature. The process of Russification then continued under Catherine II, with an uninterrupted policy of cultural assimilation that, in addition to Livonia, Finland and many other lands, fully invested Ukraine. The suppression of the Polish-Ukrainian uprising of 1863 failed to represent, with the heavy cultural bans on Ukrainians and their culture (Valuev circular, 1863), the culmination of ethnocultural discrimination and assimilation under the Empire. With Alexander II's ukaze of Ems, 1876, the culmination of those policies was reached, with a ban on the use of the Ukrainian language, referred to as a "Russian dialect", a ban on teaching in Ukrainian in schools, the withdrawal of all books in Ukrainian from local schools, and the deportation of recalcitrant Ukrainian teachers, who were sent to the furthest provinces of the Empire and replaced by colleagues seen as "true Russians". Those who managed to save themselves, taking refuge in Galicia under the Habsburg Empire, helped to fuel a Ukrainian national revanchism capable of spanning the following centuries as well as preserving, by revitalizing them, the most salient features of a specific and original culture.

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Quite another policy could have been adopted even at that time in the imperial sphere, as the growth of cities and particularly Kiev represented the development of areas in which coexistence between different ethnic groups was the norm. In Kiev, the vast majority of the population was already Russian-speaking, and the Russian language could develop as a *lingua franca* for the whole country. Even then, after all, being Russian-speaking did not at all mean being on the side of the Moscow imperial government and its impositions.

4. The reasons for independence, matured in the Soviet period

One of the most emblematic pictures of Ukrainian reality under Soviet rule is represented, among the many existing for decades and of great value, by Abdurachman Avtorchanov's now almost forgotten and no longer cited study, *Imperija Kremlja. Sovetskij tip kolonializma*,²⁰ printed in Russian

²⁰ A. Avtorchanov, *Imperija Kremlja...*

first in Germany and then in Vilnius, in 1990. In this book, the political scientist describes the reality of discrimination suffered by Ukrainians also in the Soviet period, even at the high levels of the local Party leadership.²¹ The cultural policy pursued by the Kremlin appears in all its continuity with that of the tsarist period (although the ideological character and aims of the Soviet period reveal a decisive difference, characterized by systematic planning that exacerbated the Ukrainian question).²² The logic of modern state-building in the imperial sphere, with the coherent search for political unity and internal homogeneity, is reflected in the reality of the politics of nationalities, aimed at achieving *slijanije nacii* (fusion of nationalities),²³ in the fictitious reality of the *sovetskij narod* (Soviet people). In Avtorchanov's work it appears with crystal clarity what the real centralization of power actually entails, the reality of the "apparent federation" that has been consolidating in the Soviet state, in fact dependent on the most extreme anti-federal centralization imaginable, in a hierarchical-vertical system dominated by the Party-State, at the top of the power pyramid and the rigid center-periphery system. The only exceptions to those policies were those of the 1920s,²⁴ with the policy of *ukrainizacija* and maintaining the façade of the Soviet federal system. From the 1930s, however, a devastating and de-nationalizing policy began. Even in 1972, at the height of neo-Stalinist restoration under Leonid Brežnev, there were frequent arrests of Ukrainian teachers later sentenced to multiple years in prison for teaching Ukrainian in school and other subjects in his native language.²⁵ The Ukrainian language was "purged" of its supposed archaisms and foreign word loan words. The number of magazines and newspapers was drastically reduced. The Ukrainian leadership of the Party was periodically eliminated or reduced to insignificant ranks. In parallel with the attack on churches, the destruction of family, community and ethnocultural ties, the heavy invasion into Ukrainian civil society through atomization, terror²⁶ and the systematic use of divide and rule and delation, Soviet power conducted over fifty years a planned and systematic

²¹ Ibidem, pp. 56–81.

²² On the Russification process of the Soviet period, see A. Kappeler, *Kleine Geschichte...*, pp. 236–241.

²³ A. Avtorchanov, *Imperija Kremlja...*, p. 25; B. Nahaylo, V. Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion...*

²⁴ K. Boeck, E. Völkl, *Ucraina. Dalla rivoluzione rossa...*, pp. 87–89.

²⁵ L. Pauwels, T. Pauwels, *Histoire d'Ukraine...*, p. 158.

²⁶ It is important to note that terror was not only used in the Stalin period. In 1965 and also later, during the "general pogrom" of 1972, thousands of Ukrainians were imprisoned in the GULag on charges of "anti-Soviet riots" or detained indefinitely in psychiatric hospitals. Some prisoners were released only in 1987.

policy of cultural uprooting, of erasing historical memories and monuments of the past. Ukraine suffered a tragic cultural humiliation, based on terror (culminating in the extermination of the kulaks, who in countless cases were not rich peasants at all), aimed at producing absolute homogeneity and political integration in the Soviet state, dependence of atomized individuals on the ruler, with a clear project of fusion of nationalities. In part, only a few cultural forms were artfully preserved in terms of folklore—the antechamber to extinction—which, unlike political independence, never succeeded in effectively counteracting the processes of centralization of power and the extension of the latter's control over culture in general, as well as those of progressive ethnocultural dilution. Of course, in first place in terms of severity must be placed the physical elimination by stimulating emigration and the forced deportation or murder of all the intellectual strata and the country's most creative elements—a hemorrhage from which Ukraine has not yet recovered. Moreover, as the Soviet state controlled all properties, monuments, libraries, and artistic works, inevitably these had fallen *de facto* into the hands of (and into the factual ownership of) ignorant bureaucrats²⁷ and Party personnel used to administer the domination, which had the sole purpose of the subjugation of the dominated. Not only were these not concerned, as bureaucrats, with the future value of those assets, but since they belonged to none other than the Soviet state, they were integrally subjected to Party decisions, which could lead to their depredation and total destruction. In Ukraine, as in the other countries that fell under Soviet rule, there was no possible protection from the will of the government in the matter of destruction of artistic and cultural, architectural and environmental heritage. At the end of World War II, the additional result of the war, with its tens of millions of dead, was to be added to the post-'45 repressions against the anti-Soviet civil war, which resulted in shootings, starvation, and, between 1945 and 1953 more than two million Ukrainians deported to Siberian prisons and labor camps, in conditions similar to those of other ethnic minorities, described in immortal masterpieces by writers of the stature of Varlam Shalamov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Bukovsky. The Černobyl disaster, a decisive turning point in the crisis of the Soviet system, definitively highlighted how the Soviet imperial leadership treated the local population.²⁸ The delays in intervention, the lack of consideration for human lives, the

²⁷ In the Stalin period, Party members without any culture were nearly 90 percent. Those recruited locally were often characterized by deep frustration, resentment caused by their social position, and severe psychological problems.

²⁸ On this the pages of Svetlana Aleksievich, contained in the masterpiece *Černobyl'skaya molitva* (Moskva 2007), remain illuminating. See in particular Vas-

population treated as inhabitants of a colony, ten thousand deaths in the first years after the disaster²⁹ are just some of the causes that would lead Ukrainian ecological movements to converge with the Ruch in their claim to independence.³⁰ To the conditions of generalized immiseration due to an “anti-economic” system, widespread corruption, and internal mafias that stemmed from or thrived in *symbiosis* with the Party and an irresponsible administration, was added the ecological devastation of a land battered by decades of an untold Tragedy of the commons.³¹

What more was needed to see the claims of independence and self-government recognized? Wasn't all this more than enough to have recourse to the “right of exit” from the Union, recognized by the Soviet Constitutions?

In the face of all this, it sounds at least as sinister the geopolitical determinism that is in vogue today, the primary ideological justification for a supposedly inescapable imperial recomposition³² (and more or less self-conscious variant of the Brezhnevian doctrine of “limited sovereignty”) that also reinglobes Ukraine, going through those interferences that have continued throughout the post-Soviet period, with the extension of the Kremlin's *longa manus*, feeding parental kleptocracies, electoral manipulations, attacks on the legitimate president, and blackmail capable of exploiting the forced, economic-industrial interdependencies that Stalin designed so that even in the future the right to become independent would remain a dead letter for the Soviet republics.

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5. Conclusions

What reasons did Ukrainians have for declaring independence in 1991, after the Rada had already voted in 1990 for a “declaration of sovereignty” similar to that announced in the same year by the Soviet Republic of Russia? Basically, the same ones that Yeltsin's Russian Republic had, for

ily B. Nesterenko's testimony, contained in Aleksievič's book (in the Italian translation: S. Aleksievič, *Preghiera per Chernobyl*, Rome 2002, pp. 291–301).

²⁹ Even today, the Putin regime disputes the death figures as a result of the disaster and the wholly inadequate reactions of the Soviet system, which is to blame for the most terrible consequences of the disaster.

³⁰ L. Pauwels, T. Pauwels, *Histoire d'Ukraine...*, p. 344.

³¹ G. Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, “Science” 1968, vol. 162, issue 3859, pp. 1243–1248.

³² An example of what has been published in Italy along these lines, generally accepted by the public, is Di Rienzo's book, *Il conflitto russo-ucraino*, Soveria Mannelli 2015.

wanting to end with the Soviet Union.³³ These reasons have only strengthened over the years, in the face of a political restoration in Russia of the obvious continuity with the Soviet period of a successor state like Putin's Russia, which has long made open apology for that empire, of its abuses and of the autocrats (especially Stalin) who dominated it, and which seeks to erase the past by feeding a nostalgic and *Machtpolitik*-soaked conception, accusing the Bolsheviks of failing to found a sufficiently unified imperial state and of laying the groundwork for Ukrainian independence. Even if there had not been the Ukrainian independence experience of 1917–1921, the motivations for self-government remain today as they had sprung from the overall summarized historical picture and the threads that could be pulled in 1991: a long resistance to an autocratic and tyrannical power. The right to save oneself from a tyrannical regime of imperial rule, from the long series of abuses of power, usurpations, violence, and genocide that have plagued Ukrainian history, cannot be considered a different case than, for example, that which led to the American colonies' War of Independence. With the aggravating circumstance that the degree of violence achieved in the twentieth century to maintain totalitarian political rule of the imperial and internal colonial type is incomparable to the methods of colonial rule in previous centuries. The main reason for Ukrainian independence lies in the longstanding anti-autocratic resistance and traditions of struggle against external domination, which prevented its political, cultural, linguistic,³⁴ and economic development. It is no coincidence that precisely these have been strengthening from 2013 to the present. However, the "historical justification" based on the nineteenth-century criteria of ethnocultural and linguistic homogeneity (people, language, etc.), of Herderian heritage (although it is true that Ukrainian nationality has possessed its own identity since the seventeenth century), used to exclusively legitimize political independence, remains historically determined (and dated), collectivist and organicist in its claim to see a people as a subjective entity different from the citizens who are its components. Ukrainians (understood as a much broader people, in the

³³ Even the Russians who were present in Ukraine in 1991 could no longer tolerate the Kremlin's policies. The Ukrainian declaration of independence on August 24, 1991 was recognized by the RSFSR. Dissident Ukrainians' relations with Russian human rights activists had lasted since the 1970s. The referendum on maintaining the Union (March 17, 1991), still used today as an example to contend with the legitimacy of the independence of the former Soviet republics, was an absolute farce, according to the testimony of the Russians themselves, who denounced it in many fora, until the August coup. All of this contrasts with Kremlin propaganda, which has sought to combat any Ukrainian motivation for political independence.

³⁴ L. Pauwels, T. Pauwels, *Histoire d'Ukraine...*, p. 160.

Latin sense³⁵ than the simple ethnic notion: peoples are formed when the political conditions for their existence are created)³⁶ took back in 1991 the constituent power that had been taken from them, regaining the power to determine the conditions and forms of their political coexistence and taking it back from the bloody hands of a constituted power that had become tyrannical, bloodthirsty, responsible for the annihilation of millions of lives and the attack on an entire ethnocultural tissue.

It is very difficult to underestimate, no matter how much one tries to domesticate the subject, the relevance of political independence for the preservation of the cultural, linguistic, and artistic richness of a country like Ukraine. The potential of self-government since 1991 has been far-reaching, particularly in terms of culture, recovery of one's identity and preservation of one's historical memory.

The 31 years that followed the second achievement of political independence (1991–2022) now make the arguments used by foreign heads of state and government, politicians and ministers, journalists, historians and economists, who had tried in 1990–1991 to theorize the low probability first³⁷ and the inappropriateness later (including U.S. President J. Bush

³⁵ As is well known, the Latins separated the notions of *populus* and *natio*. The confusion between these terms emerged instead from the nationalism of the late 17th century, when the idea of people was loaded with ethnocultural connotations placed at the basis of unified (and proclaimed as “national”) territorial states. In the composite and plural societies of Eastern Europe, however, for centuries the national (*natio*) identity alone was considered neither “natural” nor foundational to a polity. Today, however, the “titular majority” in the state tends to regard loyalty to that territorial state as loyalty “to its own nation”. This transformation threatens to blow the loyalty of minorities, who end up viewing rights as pertaining only to the “titular ethnicity”, to look “beyond the borders” to their own ethnic “motherland”, orienting their loyalty toward it, and to conclude, “If the state belongs to Them, it does not belong to Us.” As a backlash, minorities are being accused of being infidels, separatists, irredentists, and the spiral of insecurity is transferred to the interstate level, up to the construction of new borders.

³⁶ For example, consider the participation of Russian-speaking Ukrainians or Ukrainian citizen Russians in the Orange Revolution of 2004. At that time, an aggregate of people with different ethnonational characteristics recognized themselves as a “people”, endowed with constituent power and resulting from an act of breaking an existing constituted political-territorial order, regardless of whether or not they had a common history. The same occurred with the participation of Russian-speakers from the Donbass in street protests in Kiev during the *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* in 2013–2014.

³⁷ The lack of adequate analytical tools had led, just in 1990, one of the greatest historians of the twentieth century, Eric Hobsbawm, to an embarrassing incident. In his *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, written that year, he regarded with derision the possibility that Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania might become independent countries – see E. Hobsbawm, *Nazioni e nazionalismo dal 1870. Programma, mito e realtà*, Torino 1991. It is likely that those considerations depended on the one hand on the lack

senior, who traveled to Kiev on August 1, 1991 to prevent this eventuality)³⁸ of regaining Independence, seem laughable, especially in cultural terms. Instead, one would have to wonder what Ukraine would have been if, like the Baltic countries, it had been able to keep its Independence alive in the interwar post-revolutionary period. Indeed, this country in that period failed to avoid³⁹ what the Baltic Republics for two decades had instead managed to avoid and is still paying the consequences today, in terms of cultural, civil, economic, and political devastation.

In general, political independence is a possibility to protect discriminated and dominated groups from the homogenizing assault of external domination and/or totalitarian states. Cultures and identities, history and traditions threatened with annihilation, prove to be preservable only through that instrument,⁴⁰ the only one who can prevent its extinction

of knowledge of the history of those peoples and on the other on the totally inconsistent Hegelian myth of the "people without history". That very definition has served to support imperial appetites and continues to be used today, not surprisingly, by the Kremlin towards Ukrainians.

³⁸ President Georg Bush has never been in favor of Ukrainian independence and has always considered it a factor of instability, to be braked by dealing directly with Moscow – L. Pauwels, T. Pauwels, *Histoire d'Ukraine...*, p. 351.

³⁹ Indeed, one must ask oneself what Ukraine would have been, both between the interwar period and in the contemporary times, had it been able to maintain its political independence. The brutal fate of this country-whose independence lasted only two years-was one of subjection to appalling enslavement, permanent civil war, a devastating planned and administered system, which involved the drying up of all sources of production and trade, the destruction of capital (especially agricultural, never reconstituted in Ukraine to this day), the destructive effects of forced collectivizations, the impossibility of reconstructing property relations, the consequences of the misery and famines of 1921–1922, riots, Soviet repression, artificially created hunger (Holodomor) (R. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow. Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, Oxford 1986; E. Cinnella, *Ucraina 1932–33...*), the collapse of civilization under the heel of a violent and parasitic bureaucracy, which has appropriated all wealth and means of production, a police regime, ethnic dilution and alienation, the deportation of millions, and the eradication of an entire culture and its historical and linguistic heritage. Being able to avoid all this in the interwar period probably would have enabled Ukraine to recover its independence in 1991 in a much less traumatic way. The legacy of a devastating seventy-year regime was of course much more destructive in Ukraine than in other later occupied republics (Baltic Republics, Tuva, etc.), and the possibility of recovering the wealth of cultural heritage developed in the interwar period presented quite different characteristics. Consider, for example, the crucial problem of reconstructing property rights to land: an almost impossible task in Ukraine, unlike in the Baltic States.

⁴⁰ See: A. Buchanan, *Secession...*, pp. 21–34. The protection of pluralism had become evident with the recognition of Ukrainian citizenship to all residents in December 1991. The republic did not want to turn into an ethnic state that discriminated against minorities. In addition, all Ukrainian popular movements of the past three decades have been

by remote state powers that demand absolute submission and obedience.⁴¹ Incidentally, the “small state” also possesses the advantage of concentrating efforts in this direction, of not dissipating them, and of targeting available resources, since contrary to the false rhetoric of “The bigger the better” – the workhorse of an obsolete and highly archaic Science of Administration-economic success and per capita income, which in small sizes have proven much more easily cultivated, increased, and defended, can also play a decisive role in terms of safeguarding one’s culture, long threatened.

Of course, if self-rule can be gained through the paralysis of the previous centralized territorial state while simultaneously fragmenting its unitary territoriality, the instrument of the “nation-state” can be, especially in Eastern Europe, a source of many and even tragic problems, as seen in the twentieth century. In this area of Europe, coexistence, which has a long and composite history, needs pluralism. Otherwise, according to the logic of the modern state, the source by its nature of political-territorial unity and homogeneity, endless contrasts emerge among ethnonational minorities, the Achilles’heel of Eastern Europe. Protecting cultural, linguistic, and religious pluralism means adopting a more flexible and richer conception of nationality, integrated into civil forms of coexistence and capable of valuing culture, of which individuals are bearers, but also more complex subjective parameters that contribute to the shaping of identity. It means recovering and valuing the past, historical memories, but also the strength of the will to “be a nation” in the present and the clearly expressed desire to continue life in common by bearers of complementary and different cultures, but above all by people of mixed history and background, who are bearers for this reason of an extraordinary cultural richness. This new and at the same time ancient conception of nationality struggles to coexist with the modern “nation” state, an authentic Procrustean bed intolerant of everything that overflows from its schemes and the diversity contained within its borders.⁴²

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linked to a civic patriotism, citizenship, and not to an ethnic conception of the nation. A patriotism even more stimulated today by the Russian invasion.

⁴¹ As is well known, the Soviet period despite the old Stalinist rhetoric on the “national question,” had “solved” the problem of nationalities through violence (deportations, forced mass immigration, Russification, etc.) as it aimed to compress them to extinction. See B. Nahaylo, V. Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion...* That historical experience still has much to teach in the current thorny and dramatic Ukrainian issue.

⁴² After the collapse of the Soviet Empire, enclaves containing minorities remained in every former Soviet republic. A condition impossible to manage by means of a territoriality made up of rigid borders and sharp internal-external divide.

A reexamination of the concept of nationhood, necessitated by what we have seen in the twentieth century, also implies a rethinking of the concept of the territorial state, especially in its “nation-state” sense. The latter is certainly not the only possible political-institutional arrangement to ensure self-government⁴³ and is indeed as one of the most dangerous tools for managing it, the exact opposite of the endless variety in theory and practice of federal solutions, which are on the opposite side of the modern state’s history.⁴⁴ The coercive and homogenizing function of the nation-state can, in fact, end up undermining interethnic coexistence and jeopardize even cultures that have become majoritarian thanks to Independence. If fused with majoritarian democracy, then, that function can even become catastrophic.⁴⁵ In fact, it risks exacerbating contrasts with nationalities that from tolerated components within the state may end up feeling subject and subordinate in the face of the majority of a single ethnonational group, which can use the state instrument (and legislation) to impose its internal dominance on all others. This risk has also occurred repeatedly in post-Soviet Ukraine. However, the political solution that follows the legitimate claim of self-rule in the territory can be very different. It is possible to think about the progressive de-powering of the misuses of the state instrument and its “national” overemphasis, the depoliticization of ethnicity, the increasing valorization of the acquisitions of other ethnic groups, mixed marriages, and a polyglot society in which other languages are voluntarily acquired: especially in Ukraine, where the richness of interethnic coexistence has always been an invaluable treasure. The possibility of creating a largely Russian-speaking republic, more inclusive and pluralistic, capable of putting all minorities on an equal footing, was after all like smoke in the eyes for the Kremlin, which in fact saw it as a danger, precisely because of the possibility of constituting an alternative and freer political aggregation than that of post-Soviet

⁴³ Indeed, it can be said that, in fact, the post-Soviet independencies stemmed precisely from the failure of the attempt to achieve self-rule through a federal reorganization of the Empire, on a voluntary basis. The nation-state option was adopted later, once the non-reformability of the political-institutional system was acknowledged.

⁴⁴ For an examination of this crucial issue, see: *Introduction* to L.M. Bassani, W.H. Stewart, A. Vitale, *The Concepts of Federalism*, Milan 1995.

⁴⁵ On this question, Calhoun J.C.’s extraordinary scientific-political treatise, *Disquisition on Government* (1843–1848), is still fundamental. The Southern U.S. senator significantly recalled, in order to emphasize the potentially devastating effects of majoritarian democracy (we now know also from interethnic contrasts), the case of the Polish-Lithuanian Confederation and the longstanding presence in its institutions of the decisive institution of “competing majorities”, which has been an example and integral part of federal theory and institutions, American and otherwise.

Russia, which has undergone massive political restoration, since 1993. The adoption of federal solutions,⁴⁶ as the basis of an equal and voluntary association among the federated subjects, capable of avoiding the trap of ethnic division among the federated entities and rigid cleavages between ethnolinguistic groups,⁴⁷ with a concomitant enhancement of individual, civil and political freedoms, would have been very useful for post-Soviet Ukraine. It would also have taken the ground out from under the Kremlin's adopted justifications for its February 24, 2022 aggression against Ukraine. Although it probably would not have been able to avoid it, given that the violent choice to employ aggression and a new genocide derived mainly from reasons within post-Soviet Russia, now undergoing Stalinist restoration.

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⁴⁶ The potential of a federal structure for Ukraine has been emphasized in many studies and was already clear in 1991. Among the most interesting studies is the book by S. Andreev, *Federalizacija Ukrainy: edinstvo nacii ili raspad gosudarstva?*, Moskva 2006. In it, O. Lanovenko, V. Zolotarev, S. Rydz, S. Kiselev, O. Pokal'chuk, S. Doneckij, E. Zlobina, V. Stepanjuk, D. Koptiv, and R. Ignatovič had indicated the potential of a federal structure in a country like Ukraine, but even as late as 2004 their analyses had gone unheard. It should also be noted that a genuine federal structure does not envisage the formation of "monoethnic" federated entities (as in the Stalinist conception), but of multi-ethnic entities that are self-governing (self-rule) by enhancing pluralism, cooperation between different ethnic groups (scientific Psychology has brought extensive evidence in this regard) and allowing for a quite different standard of living, as V. Zolotarev and V. Stepanjuk, deprecating the serious repercussions of the majoritarian principle, which establishes a "zero-sum game" (conquest of concentrated power at the expense of all others), of the alleged "state language", etc. The potentials of federal arrangements and polycentric structures are limitless and the literature on the subject is huge, while those of the unitary nation-state are few, repetitive and always devastating, especially in Eastern Europe – as history has abundantly demonstrated. D. Koptiv had pointed out that precisely Ukraine's centralized unitary status was the main source of the country's instability (propensity for conflict). Faced with a federated entity such as Crimea (S. Kiselev), for example, the pretexts used by the Kremlin to intervene would have been useless.

⁴⁷ A genuine federal system and constitution would have prevented the Kiev parliament's suppression of the Crimean Constitution of 1992, accompanied by the introduction of a fragile autonomy, revocable at any time.

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