

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine - #19

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Building on Ukraine's Religious Strength

In 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) became the Union of Fewer and Fewer Republics (UFR), when fourteen republics declared their independence from Moscow and became independent states. Of these fourteen republics, Ukraine was home to the largest Christian population and the largest network of religious communities, which included both Muslim and Jewish organizations.

The U. S. International Religious Freedom Report of 2021 estimated a total population of 43.7 million Ukrainians in midyear 2021 and identified 60% of the people as Christian Orthodox, 9% as Greek Catholics, 1.5 % as Protestants and fewer than 1% as Roman Catholic. Almost all religious organizations in Ukraine took a strong pro-Ukrainian posture from the first day of the Russian invasion. Religious leaders mobilized their churches and immediately began to address the pressing needs of the Ukrainian people, including evacuation from war zones, supplying food to the vulnerable – especially the elderly, children, and orphans – and locating medical supplies for those who were displaced and forced to flee their homes. The religious mobilization in Ukraine has been remarkable and has played an important role in consolidating Ukrainian society as it faced Russia's brutal attacks.

Ukraine's Ecumenical Spirit: When I began working in Russia, I was surprised by the difficulties Protestants had cooperating with each other, as well as the deep hostility between Protestants and Orthodox Christians. When the freedom of conscience law passed in October 1990, granting complete freedom to all people of faith in the USSR, I anticipated this would minimize tensions between Christians from different denominations, and that these diverse religious communities would embrace each other. But that didn't happen. The psychology of persecution was carried over into the period of freedom. In addition, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church began working to amend the new law to give a privileged position to the Patriarch and his agenda, a goal that they achieved in 1996. The U. S. government currently ranks Russia as one of the worst in the world for religious freedom and this is part of the threat that hangs over Ukraine today, if Putin wins this struggle.

When the Kremlin forced the Russian-American Christian University to close down in 2012, our work shifted to Ukraine, and I experienced a remarkably different environment. During meetings I had with Patriarch Filaret of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Bishop Borys Gudziak, the leader of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine, and numerous Protestant leaders, they all proudly discussed their ecumenical relationships and close cooperation. They obviously enjoyed their partnerships and rejoiced in the diversity of Ukrainian society. When the war broke out in February 2022, their willingness to work together was truly impressive, and their communities provided services the government could not handle because of the priority given to demands related to military defense.

Avoiding Russia's Mistakes: When Communism collapsed in Russia, Western foreign policy elites clearly understood the dramatic changes to expect with the end of a one-party state and its centralized economic planning bureaucracy; they did not, however, understand how these revolutionary changes had their roots in the corrosive deterioration of the moral and ethical values of Soviet society.*

The experience of living in an atomized Soviet society, which prevented people from working together, required a massive change of mindset. People needed to be encouraged that the days of fear and terror had passed, and that the rebuilding of Russian society required their full participation. Trust needed to be restored, in a country where it had been destroyed. Speaking the truth needed to be practiced, in a society where double-talk was a way of life, a way to survive the grasp of the KGB.

Western advisors and the Russian officials they worked with after 1991 failed to see how cultural institutions, especially the thousands of churches, cathedrals and synagogues spread across the country, could be mobilized to bring needed cultural change. By focusing on creating free market institutions and organizing political parties, the ruling elites failed to understand that culture matters and moral and ethical issues needed to be addressed. Helping people to understand that they had rights and deserved to be participants in changes in their society was ignored despite the cries of the people. Religious leadership and their related networks in Russia could have been valuable partners, but they were ignored.

A Different Approach for Ukraine: Ukraine has a rich ecumenical spirit, and the proven cooperation by religious leaders in supporting its people during the invasion deserves more attention by the media. Religious communities, and their extensive network of non-governmental organizations, need to be actively engaged in the rebuilding process that is already underway. The volunteers from religious organizations and educational institutions, who have already made a major contribution behind the front lines, need to be fully engaged when relief efforts shift to redevelopment after the fighting ends. Western advisors need to follow Ukrainian leadership, talk less, and listen more to them and the people they serve. They understand Ukrainian culture, they know how it shapes life in their country, and they can teach us some important lessons about how to develop and strengthen democracy by creating and nurturing supportive cultural change.

** For further discussion of the Russian context, see chapter 7 – “Reading Russia Right” - in Opening the Red Door: The Inside Story of Russia’s First Liberal Arts University (InterVarsity Academic Press, 2019).*

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