



Roman Szporluk

The crisis in Ukraine: a historian's perspective

A historian knows that there are certain turning points in history when resistance to the ruling powers is justified and indeed is a moral duty of the citizen, says Roman Szporluk, Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard.

The Ukrainian crisis today brings to mind events in Poland in late 1988 and in 1989. Under the pressure of the popular democratic movement Solidarity the Communist rulers of Poland agreed to negotiate with leaders of the democratic forces and undertook to conduct an honest parliamentary election. In order to ensure that the election would be truly free, the Communists allowed the democrats access to the mass media, including TV. In the election the democrats won a convincing victory and the Communist establishment accepted the nation's verdict. In August 1989, Poland had a government headed by one of the opposition leaders. There was no violence, no arrests, no revenge.

Two years later, in August 1991, the parliament of Soviet Ukraine issued a declaration of independence and in the following December, that declaration was ratified by popular vote. At the same time Ukrainians elected their president in a vote which was generally considered to have been free. Post-Soviet Ukraine has seen several setbacks in the process of democracy building, but even as late as this year, Ukraine stood out among the post-Soviet republics (with the exception of the Baltic States) as the only one in which elections provided real choices between candidates. Yet, it was becoming clear, as the 2004 election approached, that the outgoing president, Leonid Kuchma, and his entourage, with the active support of Russia, were determined to secure the victory of their own chosen candidate. The media was heavily controlled to favor that candidate. No candidate won a majority in the October 31 ballot, according to the official count, although the opposition has charged electoral fraud in favor of Viktor Yanukovich. It became necessary to have a runoff vote which took place three weeks later, on November 21.

It is clear that the power holders in Kiev decided not to follow the 1989 Polish example. According to virtually all observers, the voting on November 21 was not free and the count was falsified on an enormous scale. The results from the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk were statistically impossible, giving Yanukovich at least 97 percent of the vote. Had the vote count been fair and honest, Viktor Yushchenko would have emerged as the clear winner. By supporting a falsified count, the Central Electoral Commission is failing to perform its legal duty, however.

In a situation like this, a law-abiding citizen has to ask whether he or she is

obliged to obey an authority that is engaged in breaking the fundamental laws of the state. Thousands of people are now demonstrating in the capital of Kyiv and in other cities and towns of Ukraine in order to defend their democratic rights and the state constitution. Especially impressive is the participation of the younger generation, including university students, which is understandable because they are the people who were young children in 1991 when democracy seemed to have been coming to Ukraine. They feel that their struggle for fair elections is legitimate even if it appears to be in opposition to the established authorities.

A historian knows that there are certain turning points in history when resistance to the ruling powers is justified and indeed is a moral duty of the citizen. Nobody questions the decision of Charles de Gaulle to defy the French parliament and the head of the French state, Marshal Petain, when they established a collaborationist regime in France in 1940. Looking back at Hitler's rise to power, many people now understand that he should have been resisted as early as 1933, even though his appointment as chancellor of the German state was consistent with legal formalities. These examples are not to suggest that President Kuchma or Viktor Yanukovich are comparable to Petain or Hitler. But they do provide historical support, just as in a different way does the case of Poland in 1989, to those who believe in the supremacy of a law that respects the fundamental human rights of the individual and the sovereignty of the nation. The decision is now in the hands of President Kuchma. It is not too late for him to uphold the integrity of the law.

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