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Ghosts of Yugoslavia linger in Ukraine

By Nikola Kaurin

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Many have attempted to compare the events in Ukraine to those of the former Yugoslavia. Here's an analysis from someone who survived that carnage.

First, a moment comes when a country simply ceases to exist. It's still called a particular name at the UN and its police wear a certain insignia but that's about it. All semblance of that country's collective ethos is gone.

In Yugoslavia this happened when the JNA top brass said "Who cares about Slovenia? There are no Serbs there".

The JNA's soldiers still carried the pan-Slavic tricolour but it had given up on the Yugoslav project as had the Yugoslav Government. It was a Yugoslav army carrying out Greater Serb objectives.

Ukraine's Yugoslavia moment came the day after the 22 February coup when the Rada voted to abolish the Russian language at every level of government. The mainstream media casually

dismissed this act as meaningless because it occurred in the 'heat of revolution'. This is false. When the barbarians storm the gates and there are 100 fires burning, what they choose to do first tells you of their priorities.

Ukraine's new European overlords saw the Russian language as a bigger problem than their country's skyrocketing debt-to-GDP ratio, rampant corruption and fertility rates which happen to be among the lowest-of-low in the world.

Ukraine in its historic understanding as a safe place where different people can live together is dead. Ukraine as a Ukrainian State or Ukrainian Derzhava is the now. Its ethos is similar to what far-right politicians like Ruža Tomašić call for where "Croatia is for Croats and everyone else is a guest".

Second, a country enters a state of civil war. It is important that we clarify what a civil war is because many have thrown it around to falsely describe recent conflicts.

Make no mistake what's going on in Syria is not a civil war. There is no nice clean split of average Syrian citizens fighting each other just like there were average Americans, Russians and Englishmen fighting among themselves. It's Allawites fighting Shias fighting Sunnis fighting Kurds. It's a sectarian conflict and there's nothing civil about it.

Even though it's politically unpopular to say so Yugoslavia was civil war in the truest sense. The JNA's first casualty was a Slovene whose helicopter was shot down by Slovenian Territorial Defence. The UDBA agent who blew the lid on Croatia's secret cash-for-weapons deal with Hungary was a Croat. The deputy commander of Sarajevo's Bosnian Muslim defenders was a Serb.

Ukraine is in a state of civil war. In a horrible coincidence the Ukraine Army's first casualty was a Russian-speaker whose helicopter was shot down over his hometown of Slavyansk. Another myth is that Ukraine's fault lines fall exclusively on ethnic lines. This is also false. Many Ukrainians in the South and East see Russians and Ukrainians as one people. After all it was only in 1991 that 71% of Ukrainians voted to preserve the Soviet Union.

Third, a country well and truly goes into what Reagan paraphrased from Trotsky as the dustbin of history. Fortunately Ukraine is not at this stage but if it's new leaders don't learn the lessons of Yugoslavia it may very well come to it.

Yugoslavia's ultimate undoing was an unwillingness of the federal government to devolve power to its republics. The new nationalist governments from Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia did not

want independence but rather a confederation of six republics. Milošević of course said no and the rest is history.

Federalism is not just the best answer to Ukraine's civil war it is the only answer. If the 22 February coup did not make pro-Russians lose trust in governance from Kiev then the vote on abolishing the Russian-language a day later certainly did.

As you read this Svoboda MPs like Iryna Farion are touring kindergartens, showing charts to children of correct (Ukrainian) names and incorrect (Russian) names. This is nothing new. Far-right Croats commonly told their Serb neighbours who didn't take up arms that if they wanted to stay in Croatia they would have to change their children's' names.

Farion is the same woman who had bus drivers fired for playing Russian songs and called for people who don't speak Ukrainian to be jailed. Farion is considered a moderate in Svoboda. If it quacks like a fascist and acts like a fascist, is it not a fascist?

It's a carousel according to State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki.

The goal of the new Ukrainian state is unity not through diversity but unity through the Ukrainization of everything in Ukraine including Russian-speakers and ethnic Russians.

The question then becomes how do you regain lost trust? The answer is you can't and you don't. But what you can do is devolve areas of social policy that have since 1991 been subject to rigorous Ukrainization such as education, arts, languages, health and local government and give them to Ukraine's regions.

How pro-Russians feel about the government of the day in Kiev becomes irrelevant if they have control over their own social policy. A Euroregion-type arrangement but with economic foundations would also allow pro-Russian regions to keep and expand trade ties with Russia.

Yugoslavia's fatal mistakes cannot be undone but they can be avoided in Ukraine. The key to this is allowing East Ukrainians to govern themselves.