

Window on Eurasia: Moscow Views Ethnic Ukrainian NGOs in Russia as Continuing Threat

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Staunton, July 15 – Even though the Russian government routinely insists that it has the right to defend and back the activities of ethnic Russian groups in Ukraine, Moscow has stepped up its campaign to isolate and shut down ethnic Ukrainian organizations in various regions of the Russian Federation.

In an article on the Geopolitika.ru portal last week, Eduard Popov gives a sympathetic treatment of this campaign, one that he suggests is necessary to protect the rights of the ethnic Russian majority and indeed the very political sovereignty of the Russian Federation (geopolitica.ru/article/ukrainskie-npo-na-yuge-rossii-perezhit-oranzhevyy-sindrom#.UeMTXW00EUM).

According to the 2010 Russian census, he says, ethnic Ukrainians numbered 1,928,000 or 1.35 percent of the Russian population, down from 2,943,000 in 2002, when they formed 2.03 percent of the total. In addition, there are from two to five million Ukrainians working full or part time in the Russian Federation.

The actual number of people in the Russian Federation of Ukrainian background is much higher, of course, but “the majority of the so-called Ukrainians of Russia identify [now] as Russians,” Popov says. Consequently, “the main goal of Ukrainian structures in Russia is the heightening of the self-consciousness of ‘the Ukrainian community.’”

Kyiv was particularly active in this regard when Viktor Yushchenko was Ukrainian president. His wife, Katerina Chumachenko, chaired Ukraine’s program for reaching out to Ukrainians abroad in general and Russia in particular. And at that time, there were Ukrainian organizations in more than 60 of the subjects of the Russian Federation.

According to Popov, many of these groups included “representatives of the state structures and nationalist organizations of Ukraine.” He says that Ukrainian nationalists have aspirations to take control of what they see as Ukrainian areas within the Russian Federation both near the Ukrainian border and far away.

Among the former are Slbozhashchina (which includes the Kursk, Belgorod, and Voronezh oblasts), Cossackia (Krasnodar kray and part of Rostov oblast), and Stavropol kray. Among the latter are “the gray wedge” which includes southern portions of Western Siberia and Northern Kazakhstan and “the green wedge” which includes Amur and Sakhalin oblasts, and Zabaykalsky, Primorsky, and Khabarovsk krays, all areas where Ukrainians have lived.

Popov says that “the min object” of Ukrainian pretensions is the Kuban, even though the census shows that only 2.6 percent of its population declares itself to be Ukrainian, a number Ukrainians dispute. In that region, he continues, there are Ukrainian nationalist “cells” and a broader range of “‘soft’ nationalists” working against Russia.

In the Kuban, there are a large number of Ukrainian NGOs, including the Kuban-Ukraine Commonwealth, the Society of the Ukrainians of Kuban, the Kuban Branch of the Donetsk Division of the Shevchenko Society, and the Ukrainian Diaspora Commonwealth. There are also a number of Ukrainian language publications there.

Ethnic Ukrainians are equally active in the Don and in Rostov, Popov says, and he provides a list of groups which he suggests are promoting nationalist and anti-Russian agendas. These groups

have challenged Russian census figures, with the leaders of the Don Ukrainians saying that their co-ethnics form 40 percent of the population, not 2.7 percent the census said.

Moscow has closed down Ukrainian language sites in the Russian Federation, including most prominently, the Ukrainian Word of Russia, which was shuttered in 2009 after two years of operation. And it has carefully monitored both regional and all-Russian ethnic Ukrainian organizations.

The Russian authorities have been concerned about Ukrainian efforts to promote the idea of “neo-pagan ‘Cossack nationalism’” among traditionally Orthodox Cossack groups in the south, but these authorities have ignored Ukrainian complaints that Moscow does not support Ukrainian-language schools in Russia although it demands that they be maintained in Ukraine.

In November 2010, the Russian Supreme Court liquidated the Federal National Cultural Autonomy of Ukrainians of Russia, a step that angered many ethnic Ukrainians and led some of them to create a successor of the same name. Russia’s justice ministry appealed and in May 2012, the Russian high court suppressed it as well.

Despite these decisions, Popov says, “Ukrainian organizations of a nationalist orientation and propagandizing the superiority of Ukrainians” exist in various Russian regions, especially in the south. And what is most striking, he adds, is that “the cultural-political expansion of Ukraine into Russia has done fallen even after the defeat of the ‘orange’ revolution.”

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