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# Ukraine's Struggle Endangers Its Democracy

By Matthew Kupfer

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At his June 7 inauguration, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko gave voice to an idea that had underpinned Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution and now sustained the nation during its dangerous separatist crisis: the desire to build a democratic state aligned with Europe.

"We want to be free. And living in a new way means living freely in a political system that guarantees the rights and freedoms of the person and the nation," he said.

But lofty ideals often fall victim to practical realities.

As Ukraine battles a rebel insurgency bolstered by Russian commanders and weaponry, its democratic credentials are now at risk. And, surprisingly, the source of that threat is not Russia, but the Ukrainian government itself.

Ukraine finds itself locked in a major struggle with Russian media for the hearts and minds of its southeastern Russian-speaking population. Meanwhile, it faces the usual obstacle

to decisive political action: internal dissent.

But Ukraine's efforts to overcome these two problems — banning and blocking groups and media that it believes threaten the country's national security — do not bode well for its democratic future.

On July 8, the Ukrainian government took aim at one of the fiercest critics of its "anti-terrorist operation" in the east: the Communist Party of Ukraine. The Justice Ministry filed charges accusing the party of providing monetary, political and military support to the pro-Russia separatists. Two weeks later, acting Prime Minister Oleksandr Turchynov dissolved the party in parliament, and more than 300 criminal proceedings were opened against members of the party.

All these actions may be legal under Ukrainian legislation, but efforts to eliminate the party are far from democratic and threaten to disenfranchise Communist Party voters, about 13 percent of the electorate during the 2012 parliamentary elections.

Kiev has also gone on the offensive against Russia's slanted state media. In March, at the urging of the National Security and Defense Council, Ukraine's television regulatory agency ordered cable companies to stop transmitting the four major Russian state television channels: Rossia-1, Channel One, NTV and Rossia-24.

The channels had wide viewership in the Russian-speaking southeast, but depicted the government as controlled by fascists and frequently fabricated information about alleged rights violations. In July, Ukraine banned several more Russian television channels, ostensibly for failing to meet European and Ukrainian content standards.

Similarly, on Aug. 4, the Ukrainian Security Service asked the Internet Association of Ukraine to block sites that support violent challenges to the constitutional order and territorial integrity of Ukraine. Such sites are undoubtedly insidious during a raging conflict, but there is a serious risk that these restrictions on freedom of information may be extended to nonviolent sites that disapprove of the new government in Kiev.

Unfortunately, many of the Ukrainian government's other recent actions against "Russian propaganda" seem to be intent on imposing a narrow vision of Ukrainian national identity, history and culture.

On July 29, Ukraine's vice premier, Oleksandr Sych, said Ukraine would impose quotas and licensing to limit the number of foreign books allowed on the Ukrainian market. While these restrictions would not be confined to Russian publications, which make up the majority of the Ukrainian literary market, it was clear that they were the main concern. Sych even alleged that Russian books were aimed at "destabilizing the situation in Ukraine."

Even the silver screen was not immune. On July 29, the Ukrainian state film agency refused to give distribution certificates for the Russian historical television series "The White Guard" and the film "Poddubny," effectively banning their showing in Ukraine. The agency alleged that these films show contempt for the Ukrainian language and state, and distort historical facts in the interests of Russia.

Most significantly, last week the Ukrainian parliament considered a bill that would allow the government to impose sanctions on individuals and companies in Russia for supporting or financing separatism in Ukraine. Although reasonable on the surface, the bill had a dark side: It would grant the president and the National Security and Defense Council sweeping authority to block pro-Russia media outlets, bypassing the usual checks and balances.

This would open the door to all kinds of censorship, as long as it is carried out in the name of national security. But on Thursday, after being roundly criticized by the OSCE and press freedom organizations, these provisions were removed from the bill.

Critics of the Ukrainian government's actions against the media and the Communist Party have alleged that these are attempts to silence and censor dissenting views — and that is a fair assessment. Ironically, such tactics are less reminiscent of European democracy than the "managed democracy" of Putin's Russia, where the government restricts opposition parties, exercises significant control over television, and has recently cracked down on the Internet.

Sadly, Kiev faces a catch-22: Some political groups and media may truly threaten Ukraine's security, but wide restrictions on them undermine the democratic values proclaimed by the government and will only serve to further embitter Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Given the scale of the struggle against Russian-backed separatists, Kiev's instinct to dissolve the Communist Party and block many forms of Russian media is understandable. But it also sets the dangerous precedent of political censorship.

In the coming months, the Ukrainian government must proceed with greater caution. Instead of banning the Communist Party, it should focus on pressing charges against those party members who have truly committed crimes under the Ukrainian criminal code. It should also abandon efforts to limit Russian books and films that, in the grand scope of Russia's propaganda blitz, are fairly benign.

Additionally, it must strictly limit the blocking of websites to only those that advocate violence. Finally, Kiev should clearly frame its ban on Russian state television — by far, the government's most understandable act of censorship — as a temporary measure. Once the conflict ends, the ban can be lifted, provided that the Russian media ceases its anti-Ukraine propaganda.

Crisis situations naturally call for extreme measures, but democratic values require that the government must respect the right to hold and express dissenting views. The tension between these two goals poses a challenge to governments, but that challenge is at the very heart of democracy.

In its struggle against an authoritarian state like Russia, Ukraine must be careful not to become one itself.

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