

Ukraine celebrates anniversary of 1991 Declaration of Independence



Members of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada bringing in the flag on August 24, 1991.

On July 16, 1990, Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, took the first hesitant step toward greater autonomy within the USSR by approving a Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine by a vote of 355 in favor and 4 against. The declaration stated that Ukrainian laws would take precedence over Soviet laws, that it would maintain its own army and national bank, and that it would at some unstated point in the future become a "permanently neutral state that does not participate in military blocs" and would neither produce nor accept nuclear weapons. The declaration also created Ukrainian citizenship, although it allowed citizens to retain Russian citizenship.

The declaration was a hesitant first step toward greater autonomy, prompted to a large extent by the louder and more frequent calls for a greater degree of autonomy, and perhaps even outright independence from Moscow, in other Soviet republics – most notably, the three Baltic republics, which repeatedly expressed their collective desire not only for more autonomy but even outright independence from the USSR. Indeed, in March 1990, Lithuania declared its independence from the USSR, and popular support was building to do the same in Estonia and Latvia.

In an effort to deal with the growing support in some of the republics for more autonomy, and perhaps even outright independence, from Moscow, in March 1991 the Gorbachev regime decided to ask all citizens in the Soviet Union to vote in a referendum that asked whether they considered it necessary to preserve the USSR as a

“renewed federation of equal sovereign republics in which the rights and freedom of an individual of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?” 83.4 percent of all registered voters in Ukraine participated and 71.5 percent said they were in favor of the proposal. Ukraine added a second question to the referendum, asking whether the voter agreed that “Ukraine should be part of a Union of Soviet Sovereign States on the basis of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine.” 81.7 percent of those voting said they agreed.

On August 24, 1991, the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, meeting unusually on a Saturday after the attempted coup in Moscow earlier in the week against President Gorbachev by those opposed to his proposal to grant more autonomy to the republics, resolved that “Ukraine shall be declared an independent democratic state on August 24, 1991. Upon declaration of its independence, only its Constitution, laws, orders of the Government, and other legislative acts of the republic are valid on the territory of Ukraine. A republican referendum shall be organized on Dec. 1, 1991 to confirm the act of declaration of independence.”

The Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine states: “In view of the mortal danger surrounding Ukraine in connection with the state coup in the USSR on August 19, 1991, Continuing the thousand-year tradition of state development in Ukraine, Proceeding from the right of a nation to self-determination in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and other international legal documents, and Implementing the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic solemnly declares **Independence of Ukraine and creation of the independent Ukrainian state - UKRAINE**. The territory of Ukraine is indivisible and inviolable. From this day forward, the Constitution and laws of Ukraine only are valid on the territory of Ukraine. This act comes into force upon its approval.”

The Act was approved by the Verkhovna Rada by a vote of 321 in favor, 2 against, and 6 abstentions. On Dec. 1, 1991, the Act of Declaration of Independence was approved in a referendum in which 84.18 percent of the registered voters participated by 92.26 percent of the voters. 7.74 percent voted against the Act and 2.1 percent abstained or cast an invalid ballot. On the same day, a presidential election took place and Leonid Kravchuk, the chairman of the Rada, running as an independent, was elected with 61.59 percent of the vote over five other candidates. Soon after the results were announced, U.S.S.R. President Mikhail Gorbachev sent Kravchuk a telegram expressing his hope that Ukraine with Kravchuk as president would assist him in implementing his ambition to form “a union of sovereign states.” In fact, Kravchuk subsequently cooperated instead with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in bringing about the demise of the USSR and the end of Gorbachev’s presidency on Dec. 25, 1991.

David R. Cameron
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