



BULLETIN

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Honoring of Stepan Bandera: Challenges for Poland's Policy towards Ukraine

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President Viktor Yushchenko's decision to award posthumously to Stepan Bandera the highest Ukrainian state distinction has sparked much controversy in Ukraine. Poland should consider lodging a protest that will highlight the potentially damaging impact of this decision on bilateral relations between the two countries. Moreover, steps should be taken to promote better understanding by Ukrainian elites of the Polish historical perspective and to minimize the impact of differences in the interpretation of the common past on day-to-day bilateral relations.

On this 22 January President Yushchenko awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine and the respective State Order to Stepan Bandera in recognition of the “indomitable spirit” of that leader of radical Ukrainian nationalists, his “heroism,” and “great selflessness” in the struggle for independence and for the Ukrainian national idea.

The president's decision has aroused much controversy, particularly because it is not the first of this nature (in 2007 Yushchenko bestowed Hero of Ukraine title on another leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), Roman Shukhevych, who as a commander of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) had been co-responsible for the ethnic cleansing in south-eastern provinces of the interwar Poland). In the 1930s Bandera masterminded terrorist attacks and assassinations of Polish and Ukrainian activists who worked towards improving relations between the two nationalities. During World War II he formed Ukrainian military units to be incorporated into the Wehrmacht. It was on his initiative that Ukraine's independence was proclaimed after German forces had entered Lviv in 1941. That move was not agreed with the Third Reich authorities, and Bandera was sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp—which is why he is not held directly responsible for the UPA-perpetrated ethnic cleansings, in which at least some dozen thousands Poles were killed as well as representatives of other nationalities. However, he has never denounced the massacre.

Unlike in the west of Ukraine where Bandera has a good image (he is held to epitomize the independence struggle and is associated predominately with anti-Soviet activities), people in other parts of the country have ambivalent, or outright negative, perceptions of him. Bandera has been accused of chauvinism, collaboration with the Nazis, and crackdowns on Ukrainians who did not share the OUN ideals. Yet even in regions outside western Ukraine it is not uncommon for people with a strongly developed sense of Ukrainian nationality to show a moderately positive attitude towards Bandera. Ukrainian historians are divided in their assessments of Bandera and the UPA, and textbooks usually steer clear of evaluative opinions.

The Party of the Regions led by Viktor Yanukovich, the short-odds runner in the presidential runoff election, expressed its regret over Yushchenko's decree. It cannot be ruled out that in the future this party will try to overturn the president's decision, all the more so because it was taken in violation of the law (only citizens of Ukraine are eligible for the Hero of Ukraine honor—and Bandera was a Polish citizen). Serhiy Tihipko who had come in third in the first round of the election also denounced the plan to honor the leader of the nationalists and he warned that Yushchenko's decision might hurt relations with Poland and Russia. Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko has evaded comment. For her this is an awkward affair, because while she competes against Yanukovich for presidency she is courting voter support in various parts of the country.

Honoring of Bandera: Underlying Reasons and Political Consequences. Possibly, Yushchenko's decision to honor Bandera was prompted by political calculations of gains. His failure in the first round of presidential election (5,4% votes) notwithstanding, he has no intention of retiring from politics and he plans to form a bloc of his own for parliamentary elections. His electorate is concentrated in the former Eastern Galicia where he enjoys the support of over 25% population.

The president's decision, which presumably reflects his personal views, is in line with his efforts to deepen the de-Sovietization and de-Russification of the Ukrainian society's historical memory. Yushchenko has worked towards the reconciliation of UPA fighters and Red Army soldiers and he has sought to incorporate the west-Ukrainian tradition of independence struggle into the nation-wide historical memory. Yet his top priorities included the dissemination of the knowledge of the Great Famine of the 1930s, in the belief that this memory will integrate the Ukrainian society, and international recognition of that tragedy as the genocide of the Ukrainian people. He has highlighted efforts of the Cossacks and of Ukrainian nationalist movement activists to put an end to Russia's control over the Ukrainian lands. He has tried to avoid historical disputes with Poland.

Presumably Yushchenko did not mean to cause tensions with Poland as he took the decision to honor Bandera, yet he failed to appreciate the repercussions of this decision for Polish-Ukrainian relations in the future. This affair will weigh down on them. It will damage Ukraine's image among the Polish public—all the more so because this is yet another of a series of history-related incidents to have sparked much media comment. Only last year Ukrainian Security Services chief likened the pre-war Polish police to the Gestapo and the NKVD; a group of Ukrainian cyclists organized a "Bandera trip of honor" with an intent to go into the Polish territory; and Ukrainian intellectuals and the Ternopil and Lviv District Councils sharply denounced the Sejm's resolution to pay homage to the victims of the Volhynia massacre. In Poland the media have cited grievances voiced by communities in which family members had been victims of the UPA: that the state authorities and elites, anxious to maintain good relations with Ukraine, have neglected efforts to ensure for the Volhynia massacre its due place in the memory of national martyrdom and to have it recognized as the crime of genocide.

This decision of Yushchenko, who himself comes from a quite Russified part of the state, bears out a hypothesis that in Ukraine a vision and remembrance of history prevailing in the western part of the country, and a historical narrative based on ethnocentric nationalism, represent the chief alternative to an account of history based on the Russian and Soviet perception of the past. This "alternative" treats the concept of the nation and of the ethnic group as identical; it assumes that to mark out political borders according to ethnic borders is the only just principle; and it presupposes that the criteria of belonging to an ethnic group are clear. In addition, it vests in a single ethnic group the exclusive right to a given territory and it often affirms actions, whatever they may be, taken against "occupying forces." Such are the assumptions underlying school textbooks in which Poland and the Poles are portrayed as oppressors of the Ukrainian people and from which the positive aspects of the Poles' coexistence with the Ukrainians are missing.

Conclusions. The decree of the Ukrainian president is an unilateral act officially expressing the will of the state. Therefore the Polish authorities should consider filing a protest note, because the neglect of this measure will be construed under international law as the acceptance by the Polish state of the heroization of Bandera.

The decree has aroused much controversy in Ukraine itself, therefore it should not be seen as reflecting the entire Ukrainian society's position. Oversimplified media suggestions to that effect should be repudiated. It is advisable to promote persons who can be regarded as positive symbols of Polish-Ukrainian relations. The 90th anniversary of the treaty of alliance between Poland and the People's Republic of Ukraine, coming this April, will be a good opportunity. A Sejm declaration paying homage to the Ukrainian soldiers who under Symon Petlura defended Poland against the Bolshevik invasion would provide a helpful point of reference for the two countries' further historical dialogue.

Given the fundamentally different ways of structuring the historical narrative and the disparate visions of history in Poland and Ukraine, it must be assumed that history-related disputes will be often producing tensions between the two countries, particularly as the Ukrainian state becomes stronger. For this reason Poland should make more effort to bring home to the Ukrainians the Polish historical perspective and to modify the prevalent Ukrainian visions of Polish-Ukrainian relations in the past. A number of initiatives could help: the intensification of historical dialogue between the two countries; more scholarships and grants to support joint research; more funds for publishing and editing historical sources; stronger academic cooperation; conferences, exhibitions, contests, and historical educational projects targeted at Ukrainians. These efforts would be facilitated by the establishment in Kyiv of a Polish Historical Institute patterned after equivalent German institutions. Last but not least, preparing history teaching aids with texts on the same subjects written by Polish and Ukrainian researchers would be a worthwhile project.