Ecocentric Ukraine: a vision

Contributed by V.I. Postnikov
10 December 2013

Editor's note: the following piece is from an eye-witness to the fierce political upheaval in Ukraine. It is also a follow up to Peter Crabb's recent Collapse: The Post-peak Narrative. Postnikov's photos from the weekend's clashes are at bottom.

A growing sense of “oppression” has had ecological roots – less visible, perhaps, but more inexorable than the ideologically touted tyrannies of ruling classes or regimenting activities of overzealous bureaucracies. – William R. Catton, Jr, “Bottleneck: Humanity’s Impending Collapse”, p. 187

General idea

The complex processes that are taking place globally and locally (climate change, deficit of resources, environmental pollution, extinction of species, let alone the incompetency and self-indulgence of politicians), have put Ukraine in extremely difficult situation, practically on the verge of collapse of the nation [1].

And the problem is not so much in incompetency of politicians (which is obvious), but in the complexity of ecological and socio-political processes that cannot be unraveled by hordes of scientific institutions and “political analysts.”

The obsolete paradigm of social organization (centralised government, parliament) and its economy (devouring of resources) endanger millions of lives (not only humans).

Therefore, societies should embrace a decentralized “horizontal” model as soon as possible, in order to save natural resources, and the viability of population.

Decentralisation should secure a bioregional structure of the country, i.e., a division into many bioregions with characteristic natural and cultural features. It is thought that most feasible (and natural) is to divide the regions along the major rivers and mountains of the territory. However, the existing administrative divisions that match these criteria could remain untouched.

Therefore, a bioregion can be represented by an eco-settlement, a group of settlements, a town, or a group of towns. The principle characteristic of a bioregion – the independent settlement of people, united by common ecological and cultural conditions, and common goals (ecological, religious, cultural, etc). The amount of people and the dynamics of population should conform with the “natural carrying capacity” of the region [2], or its bio-potential.

The life in a bioregion should be regulated exclusively by its population. The rights for the use of bioregional resources belong equally to all members of the region and can’t be delegated (or sold) to the state, or members of other regions. Each bioregion develops its own local economy. Between regions, a barter economy is established. A local currency could also be introduced.

The state is endowed with the sole competence of defending the outer borders and some general functions (juridical, ecological, etc). All other functions the state should leave to bioregions.

Information exchange is provided significantly by social networking. The social (local) network within bioregions could be of great use. Not like Facebook that reminds me of a global litter box. The local network should provide all information on the state of affairs within the bioregion, above all.

Historically (and uniquely), in the territory of Ukraine in 1919-1921, attempts were made to establish a libertarian government with close political goals (see Free Territory [3]).

Existential Elements

The idea of bioregionalism has been known for a long time. In certain countries, it is being actively pursued despite the opposition from the establishment. My personal interest has sprung from my visits to the Findhorn eco-village, [4], as well as from studying the international legacy of self-sustained communities. [5]

However, I suspect that the main problems impeding the transition to an alternative lifestyle lie in the minds of the people, that is, in the psychological/existential area.

There are main elements that must be overcome. I will name only three:

1. To live not for a boss

People should learn how to handle their own lives. Deep change in consciousness is needed. Belief in oneself, in people, in ideals. Overcoming the fear felt before authorities.

2. To overcome existential fear (death, decease, poverty, etc.).

This can be assisted by extended consciousness. It is a personal task for everyone. Shedding the fear is possible only through acquiring the soulful/spiritual strengths in Nature. It is of paramount importance therefore to save Nature – we can't exist without her. Nature gives spiritual strength to resist the onslaught of techno-civilization. Those isolated from Nature gradually lose that strength]

3. To overcome the opposition of powerholders.

It is possible only by way of building solidarity, rejection of the "benefits" and their replacement with higher values. To seek and find like-minded people and act collectively.

These three existential tasks are almost insurmountable.

Therefore any theorizing schemes, socio-design or social engineering, etc., to a large extent, are useless. Nontheless, the idea of decentralization is not beyond grasp for common people (and as such, has superiority over other "high brow" social projects). It must be wrapped in simple words to become comprehensible for millions.

Sure, education is badly needed. Articles, books, films. They are tragically lacking in Ukraine. In other countries, a sea of

information. The number of eco-settlements is growing worldwide, but media keep silent. To break through the wall of media suppression is extremely difficult. Besides, I'm not certain if the idea can be implemented before collapse, war, or pro-fascist regimes take the upper hand. But even they won't last long. Decentralization (or to be more precise, a comeback to the long-forgotten forms of human organization – the tribal forms) will come necessarily on the ruins of industrial civilization.

General features of bioregionalism

Bioregionalism is a political, cultural and ecological system, based on naturally singled out zones, called bioregions, or eco-regions. [6] Bioregion also represents a cultural phenomenon, and is based on traditions, knowledge, and solutions of local population.[7] The term was initially put forth by Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann in the 1970s. [8]

The policy of bioregionalism is directed against one-sided global economy and consumerist society, and against harm to the environment. This policy aims at the following (but not limited to) [9–14]:

- To establish political borders in accordance with cultural/ecological borders.[8]
- To preserve unique ecology/cultural identity of bioregions
- To promote sustainability of the bioregion (growing and consumption of its own products; use of local materials and energy resources).
- To cultivate local flora and fauna
- To preserve/restore wild nature.

In the purely human sense:

- To learn anew what it means "to be human."

Politico-administrative changes

To achieve the goal of ecocentricity in Ukraine, needed are: consensus in all layers of society, the understanding of the inevitability and necessity of radical changes, and a favorable world situation. To that end, the following steps are proposed:

Step 1: Setting-up a federal state

The first step in decentralization is the federal multi-cultural, multi-national state, with three (or more) cultural centers (capitals). This step is needed from the following considerations:

• elimination or easing ethnic or cultural rivalry

• free development of culture and language of all indigenous peoples

• promotion of cultural diversity

• greater cultural and political stability (for example, for Russians in Ukraine to develop their cultural identity, different from" greater" Russia)

Historically, Ukraine comprises, at least, several obvious “lands” with their political and cultural centers:

• Western Ukraine with Lviv

• Eastern Ukraine (“Little” Russia) with Kharkiv

• Crimean Tatar autonomy with Simferopol

• Odessa region with Odessa

Therefore, it seems quite natural to organize these “lands,” or “large-scale bioregions,” into what would be called perhaps the Federal Republic of Ukraine (FRU). (One more purely poetical consideration: “fru” in Old Norse means “lady.” Ukraine’s spirit is feminist: it never conquered, but was conquered many times). The Norse element is historically relevant as Vikings set up the Russian state.)

Several major cities should have autonomy similar to bioregions. These are cosmopolitan Kiev and Odessa.

Step 2. Further decentralization into bioregions (via cultural, ethnic, and ecological features).

Several ethnic groups could reside in the bioregion (for example, Rousiny in Western Ukraine, or Russians in Crimea). To preserve their identity (language, culture, etc.), local ethnic groups may organize their own communities (Kossack villages, farms, etc.), while multi-cultural eco-villages could embrace common ethnic, religious, cultural, or artistic values. To organize such a settlement in a certain bioregion the corresponding ecological/physical conditions should be met regarding sufficient natural carrying capacity.

In towns/cities, the eco-settlements could be organized through cultural or administrative division (e.g., districts, streets, multi-storied buildings, etc). The Transition Town movement in England could serve as an alternative model. [15]

Step 3. Transition to an ecocentric state

In the course of time, the enhancement and mutual enrichment of "lands" will result in erasing the formal borders. Such institutes as political parties, parliament, will be obsolete and will be gradually replaced by the Council of Lands. There will be no need for political parties which historical roles had been to promote class, ethnic, or other interests for particular groups of people. The issues that emerge in the ecocentric society (bioregions) are being resolved on a participatory and collective basis (as in traditional native American "governments") The representatives of all lands will meet and discuss the issues of common interest (e.g., festivals).

Structural changes

After the majority of the population has achieved necessary understanding of the necessity of radical structural and personal changes along with corresponding political transformations, the program of reviving the natural potential of Ukraine (“carrying capacity”) and saving its population from extinction, will comprise the following:

In education:

1. Obligatory education in ecology from an early age, and further continuous self-study [16];

2. Education in sport, particularly, sailing, outdoor games;

3. Esthetic and music education, poetic education from an early age;

4. Education in various craftwork;

5. Education in permaculture (in high schools, colleges and universities);

6. Enhancement of technical education with the knowledge of:

- risk assessment of techno-catastrophes/pollution and their avoidance;

- replacement of complex/dangerous industries with ecologically friendly ones;

- obligatory introduction of humanitarian and life sciences (ecology, biology, sociology, philosophy, ethics, etc);

7. Enhancement of humanitarian education with the knowledge of:

- life sciences (ecology, biology, psychology, philosophy, physics);

- technical systems and their risks.

In science:

1. Researches in complex systems' behavior [17], risks of techno-catastrophes;

2. Research in safe dismantling and/or shutdown of dangerous/polluting industries [18];

3. Ecological/biological studies;

4. Sociological/psychological studies;

5. Medical and health studies;

6. Anthropological studies (culture, human evolution, psychology of creativity, etc.);

7. Research in low-tech systems (search of ecologically friendly and safe technologies, replacing high-tech and energy intensive technologies).

In economics:

1. Subordination of all the economy to the preservation of high quality of the environment;

2. Transition to a local economy (barter, LETS [19]);

2. Radical decrease in manufacturing/consumption of energy/products;

3. Horse breeding;

4. Organic agriculture, permaculture;

5. Revival of traditional craftwork and arts;

6. Preservation/revival of wild nature;

7. Refusal to extract/import fossil-fuels, uranium and other ores on a mass scale;

8. Refusal of nuclear power;

9. Refusal of plastics;

10. Refusal of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides, etc.;

11. Refusal of vast steel industry;

12. Refusal of bio- nano- robo-technologies;

13. Every city dweller should own a plot to grow his/her food;

14. Collective, or individual farms, eco-settlements, ashrams, including in the cities.

In transport:

1. Refusal of cars;

2. Sail transport [20];

3. Bicycle and pedal-cart transport;

4. Refusal of airplanes;

5. Zeppelins;

6. Re-forging manufacturing to:

- bicycles;

- oar and sail boats;

- ski and sleds.

In defense:

1. Refusal of sophisticated weaponry and its trade;

2. Contracting the armies to a minimum;

3. Organising the ecological police;

4. Banning of foreign military bases on Ukrainian territory;

5. Banning of large scale military training on Ukrainian territory;

6. Voluntary draft;

7. Maintaining good relations with every country.

Conclusion

It is asking a lot for the mass of people agitated in a political crisis, when personal survival has been elevated to an urgent collective concern, to look at the big picture and visualize a radically different future. In almost every case in the past, revolutions have really been a reshuffling of power holders such that reforms are couched as a revolutionary approach. But if the same old cultural and social ethics persist, such that short-sighted rampant exploitation of nature is encouraged for short-term (if democratic) gain, the end result is where the discredited capitalist and imperialist nations are headed: collapse and general extinction for life as we know it.

References

[1] Factbook showing Ukraine's having 2nd highest death rate in the world: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2066rank.html

[2] Catton, W. (1982) Overshoot: the Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change. University of Illinois Press.

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Territory

[4] http://www.findhorn.org/

[5] Metcalf, B. (2000/1) Sustainable Communal Living Around the Globe. Diggers and Dreamers, pp. 5 – 19.

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bioregionalism

[7] Alexander, D. (1996) Bioregionalism: The Need For a Firmer Theoretical Foundation. Trumpeter v.13.3.

[8] Berg, P. and Dasmann, R. (1977) Reinhabiting California. The Ecologist, vol 7, no. 10.

[9] Davidson, S. (2007) The Troubled Marriage of Deep Ecology and Bioregionalism. Environmental Values, vol. 16(3), pp. 313-332.

[10] Bastedo, J. (1994) Shield Country: The Life and Times of the Oldest Piece of the Planet, Red Deer Press.

[11] Berg, P. (1978) Reinhabiting A Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology of Northern California. San Francisco: Planet Drum.

[12] McGinnis, M. (1998) Bioregionalism, Routledge.

[13] Sale, K. (1985) Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision. Random House.

[14] Thayer, R. (2003) LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice. University of California Press.

[15] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transition_Towns

[16] Center for Ecoliteracy http://www.ecoliteracy.org/about-us/what-we-do

[17] Tainter, J. (1988) The Collapse of Complex Societies. Cambridge University Press.

[18] Postnikov, V., Dismantling the Infrastructure: A Scientific Approach http://www.culturechange.org/cms/content/view/584/66/

[19] http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_Exchange_Trading_Systems

[20] http://www.SailTransportNetwork.org and

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trade_route_from_the_Varangians_to_the_Greeks

"The Trade Route from the Varangians [Vikings] to the Greeks was used to transport different kinds of merchandise. Wine, spices, jewelry, glass, expensive fabrics, icons, and books came from the Byzantine Empire. Kiev used to trade bread, handmade goods, silver coins, etc. Volhyn traded spinning wheels and other items. Certain kinds of weapon and handicrafts came from Scandinavia. Northern Rus' offered timber, fur, honey and wax, while the Baltic tribes traded amber "

Victor Ivanovich Postnikov, born in 1949, in Saint-Petersburg, Russia, is a poet-translator, writer, and (left) biocentrist. Former research scientist and educator (DSc in Electrodynamics, 1992). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, gave up his scientific career in favor of radical ecology and poetry. The acquaintance with deep ecology has brought him to the camp of ecocentrists around the globe. Since 2009, an editor of the online journal Dandelion Times. He can be reached at vpostnikov "at" yahoo.com
He resides in Kiev, Ukraine, with his wife Elena, an architect, two children Ivan and Anastasia, a cat Dunya and a dog Lucky. Enjoy his previous articles on Culture Change.