



The Ruthenians' 15 Minutes Of Fame

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One barely noticed (there was no mention even on Reuters) but potentially significant event in Central and Eastern Europe over the Christmas period was the declaration of independence by the Ruthenians from Ukraine. Lest you wonder who the Ruthenians are, they are an eastern Slavic ethnic group, one of a handful of peoples in Europe (along with the Frisians, Sorbs, Kashubes, and Saami) that do not have their own sovereign state.

But why does this matter? After all, the Ruthenians are obscure and few in number (some say up to a million) right? Well, yes, but one of the lessons of the collapse of the USSR and Yugoslavia is that what were once highly obscure places like Kosovo, Macedonia, and Ossetia can quickly become global crises once the Great Powers get involved.

The reason the Ruthenians matter – at least from a geopolitical point of view – is that on declaring independence just before Christmas, the self-styled prime minister, Petr Getsko, called on Russia to recognise the new state, which is tucked away in the bottom left hand corner of Ukraine that borders Poland and Slovakia. It is unclear how much local support the declaration carries, but it may be worth keeping an eye on.

Russia has not said anything thus far, but given that Moscow officially recognised Georgia's breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia a few months ago after going to war with Georgia, there is now a precedent for the Kremlin's unilateral recognition of new states. Indeed, Russia and Ukraine have been at loggerheads in recent years over gas supplies and the latter country's drift towards the West under President Viktor Yushchenko following the 2004-05 'Orange Revolution'.

Moreover, the coming year will see another presidential election in Ukraine, in which the country's geopolitical orientation will be tested. Therefore, if Moscow senses that Ukraine is irreversibly on a Westward course, it could stir up trouble by supporting the Ruthenians. However, too much meddling could backfire, for it could embolden Kiev's anti-Russian mood. Either way, the Ruthenians could be set to enjoy – in the words of their most famous descendant, Andy Warhol – their fifteen minutes of fame.