

Yushchenko's bloc strives to be a 'broad church'

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Is former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko a “Kuchma lackey” or a brilliant strategist? Both viewpoints can be heard within Ukraine. The truth is that Yushchenko is certainly not a “Kuchma lackey.”

The difference between Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, his former deputy and now leader of the opposition National Salvation Forum, echoes the conflict between radicals and pragmatists that has existed in Ukraine since 1992 and in other post-communist states such as Poland.

In February 1992, Rukh nearly split when President Leonid Kravchuk sought an alliance. The radicals led by Vyacheslav Chornovil were reluctant to cooperate with the former national communists. Chornovil's pragmatic opponents went on to cooperate with Kravchuk, subordinating democratization and economic reform to the interests of state and nation building.

With historical hindsight it appears that the radicals were correct to argue that, although Ukraine had succeeded in achieving its national revolution (independence), there was still a need for a democratic revolution. Ten years on, Ukraine's “unfinished democratic revolution” is still waiting to happen.

A similar division of democratic forces exists today. The radicals are now a vocal minority grouped under Tymoshenko's National Salvation Forum (NSF).

They are allied to the Socialists, who have evolved to a pro-statehood position. Like Chornovil's Rukh in 1992, the NSF argues that Ukraine needs a democratic revolution to radically change the political system.

Ironically, both wings of Rukh are today within the moderate-pragmatic Yushchenko bloc, which refuses to describe itself as “oppositionist” to Kuchma, though it dislikes oligarchs.

The fact that voters can choose between moderate reformers (Yushchenko) or radicals (the NSF and the Socialists) is welcome. Ukrainian political culture is centrist and conservative (as the decline in support for the opposition after the March 9 violence showed). Therefore it is not surprising that Yushchenko’s approach is the more popular.

Nor is it surprising that Our Ukraine includes some “mini-oligarchs” (Petro Poroshenko) and representatives from the presidential camp (Roman Bezsmertny and Yury Yukhanurov). After all, many state officials are displeased with the current situation. For example, Borys Tarasiuk, who served as foreign minister until October 2000, is now a member of Our Ukraine.

Another argument in favor of Yushchenko’s pro-Kuchma, anti-oligarch strategy is that, ironically, Kuchma’s main base of support is among voters with a national-democratic orientation who look to him as the “guarantor” of statehood and independence. These voters might be put off if Yushchenko took an anti-Kuchma stance.

On the other hand, the alternative of a powerful Tymoshenko-Yushchenko alliance would present a far clearer threat to the oligarchs and Kuchma and might be more successful in completing the “unfinished democratic revolution.”

In a country where all politicians are routinely very unpopular, Yushchenko stands out as the one figure with a consistently high popular rating. In fact, Yushchenko’s personal rating is far higher than that of his Our Ukraine election bloc.

In a survey carried out in November by Intermedia where respondents were asked to which politicians they felt closest, Yushchenko scored the highest with 29.3 percent, with Communist leader Petro

Symonenko and Kuchma trailing far behind at 11.4 and 8.9 respectively.

Yushchenko's ratings are a threat to the oligarchs and Communists, for whom Yushchenko has never hidden his dislike.

Yushchenko's dislike of the oligarchs is grounded in his national-democratic, patriotic opposition to those he feels have hijacked the Ukrainian state and his insider knowledge of high-level corruption. That Kuchma is afraid of Yushchenko can be seen by the appointment of the head of the Presidential Administration Volodymyr Lytvyn to lead the presidential For a United Ukraine bloc.

In addition, for the first time in Ukraine's history, the Communists' position as the most popular party is under threat. The Communists will always be able to count upon a hardcore vote of around 20 percent. But, those who voted Communist as a protest now have alternatives – the Socialists, NSF and Our Ukraine.

The Communists are partially discredited because of their cozy relationship of mutual dependence with Kuchma, which may prompt some protest voters to switch to the Socialists or even the NSF. On April 26 the Communists allied with the oligarchs to pass a vote of no confidence in Prime Minister Yushchenko. Although Yushchenko had paid off wage and pension debts – which the Communists should have approved – they found his pro-Western and national-democratic leanings more unacceptable than the oligarchic regime. A semi-reformed, corrupt regime linked culturally and economically to Russia and Eurasia was better for them geopolitically. Such a regime would also ensure continuing voter support for the Communists due to its economic mismanagement.

Yushchenko's threat is therefore two-fold. Firstly, voters now have an alternative to oligarchs and Communists. Secondly, his pragmatic stance will draw disgruntled members of the establishment who would never support the Socialists or NSF. Yushchenko has tried to woo the

latter by promoting a “constructive” image. “Our bloc is not aiming to fight the authorities or anybody else,” he has insisted.

Admittedly, Yushchenko’s “patriotic stand” is partially due to timidity, since he may still hope to obtain some moderate “administrative resources” for his election campaign and to avoid being blocked by the authorities.

How then does Yushchenko’s strategy fit in with Kuchma’s? What is clear at the moment is that Kuchma is interested in three factors in the next Rada.

Firstly, he still hopes that a non-left majority in the next Rada will implement his April 2000 constitutional changes. Although there may indeed be a non-left majority, any vote by more than 225 deputies would require an alliance between the national democrats (including Our Ukraine) and the oligarchs, which seems unlikely. Even if such a majority exists, however, changing the 1996 Constitution would require at least 300 votes – an impossible feat.

Secondly, Kuchma needs to be able to find a successor who will allow him to leave office with assurances of immunity from prosecution. Many individuals are seeking to ingratiate themselves with Kuchma. Yushchenko may join them in return for being appointed his successor.

Thirdly, there is a relationship of mistrust between Kuchma and the oligarchs. Kuchma does not want any bloc to have a majority in the Rada, and he wants to ensure that both Our Ukraine and For a United Ukraine are in the Rada but that neither has a majority.

Meanwhile, Yushchenko’s bloc is such a broad church that it could well fall apart once in the post-April 2002 Rada over questions such as toeing a neutral line toward Kuchma. One thing is for sure in Ukrainian politics and that is nothing is for sure.

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