
Opinion » Op-Ed

15 June 2006

How to understand Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko

To understand Viktor Yushchenko's inability to become master of his own house, one has to unpack the myths that were created around him when he was prime minister in 2000-2001 and a presidential candidate in 2004

Four out of five political forces in the Ukrainian parliament have described the political situation in Ukraine as a deep crisis. Only the pro-presidential Our Ukraine bloc seems to believe there is no crisis in Ukraine.

At the root of this crisis is not the dragging out of coalition talks or even constitutional reform, but President Viktor Yushchenko's leadership style and political culture. Many Ukrainians feel there is no 'hospodar,' or master, in the house.

To understand Yushchenko's inability to become master of his house, one has to unpack the myths that were created around him when he was prime minister in 2000-2001 and presidential candidate in 2004. Yushchenko has never felt comfortable as an opposition politician.

Between 1994 and 2001, Yushchenko was a loyal government servant under President Leonid Kuchma, first as chairman of the National Bank and then as premier. This is not unusual in the post-Soviet world, as many national democrats also served in government before becoming oppositionists. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili served under former President Eduard Saakashvili, whom he removed from power in the November 2003 Rose Revolution.

What is surprising in Yushchenko's case is his unwillingness to become a true oppositionist to the very last. The Yushchenko government was removed in April 2001 at Kuchma's instigation after a Communist-centrist vote of no confidence. Nevertheless, Yushchenko and the Our Ukraine bloc he established for the March 2002 elections continued to believe that Kuchma would anoint him as his successor.

Yushchenko's and Our Ukraine's faith in Kuchma anointing him only fell by the wayside in November 2002, nearly two years after he was removed as premier. The reason for the disappointment was the appointment of the Donetsk governor Viktor Yanukovich as prime minister.

The appointment of Yanukovich was a tactical move by the then head of the presidential administration, Viktor Medvedchuk, to thwart an Our Ukraine-Donetsk alliance in the 2004 presidential elections. The Kuchma-Medvedchuk strategy was to ensure that Yushchenko and Yanukovich became foes, and if the elections were annulled, that either Kuchma could run again (as the Constitutional Court had

permitted) or then National Bank head Serhiy Tyhipko would run in new elections in 2005.

Yushchenko's and Our Ukraine's stance also was revealed during the Kuchmagate crisis. As premier, Yushchenko never backed the protests and did not stand up for his first deputy premier, Yulia Tymoshenko, when she was arrested in January 2001. Yushchenko also signed a letter, alongside Kuchma and Rada speaker Ivan Plyushch, condemning the protestors as 'fascists'. Even after the failure to obtain Kuchma's anointment to be successor, Our Ukraine didn't play a role in the anti-Kuchma protests. The Arise Ukraine! Protests of 2002-2003 were again dominated by the Socialists and Tymoshenko's BYuT.

The national democrats, who later united in Our Ukraine, were similar to Yushchenko in their inability to move into the opposition. They never supported calls for Kuchma's impeachment, as they stuck to the view that the president is the head of state and his fall could lead to Ukraine losing its independence.

Yushchenko and Our Ukraine therefore only demanded the removal of the heads of law enforcement agencies, which Kuchma agreed to. They preserved the view of the president as the 'good Tsar'.

All the blame for Ukraine's ills was directed by Yushchenko and Our Ukraine at Medvedchuk, whom they sought to remove as deputy speaker in December 2001 in revenge for firing Yushchenko as premier (Medvedchuk's bloc not being elected into the 2006 parliament was a bonus). Charges of organizing the April 2004 fraudulent Mukachevo elections and then the poisoning of Yushchenko have also bypassed Kuchma and been blamed on Medvedchuk.

Yushchenko's and the national democrats' statist position was at odds with the Socialists and BYuT. It was these forces that constituted Ukraine's only real opposition.

If Prime Minister Yushchenko and the national democrats had backed the BYuT-SPU opposition during Kuchmagate it is unlikely that Kuchma would have remained in office. De facto, the national democrats kept Kuchma in power for three more years.

Yushchenko and the business wing of Our Ukraine were always closer in politics to the 'softliners' in the Kuchma administration, the so-called moderate centrists, than to the SPU and BYuT. Leading Our Ukraine businessmen and Yushchenko always had more in common with former speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn, the Agrarians and People's Democratic Party (NDP) than with the opposition.

The only national democratic exception during the Kuchmagate protests and since the Orange Revolution was the Reforms and Order Party (R&O), which was divided. Some R&O members backed the protests while others refused. This was repeated during the 2006 elections, when the R&O again adopted a middle ground between the Orange opposition (BYuT) and Our Ukraine.

Comparing the configuration of Our Ukraine in 2002 and 2006 reveals these divisions. In 2002, Our Ukraine was a far broader national democratic coalition that

included R&P and Yuriy Kostenko's Ukrainian People's Party (UNP). In other words, it included both successor wings of Rukh, one which was the UNP.

In 2006, most national democratic parties had fled Our Ukraine. The UNP and R&P created their own blocs, as both were unhappy with Yushchenko's policies and the dominant influence of centrist businessmen.

In 2002, Our Ukraine had a more evenly balanced mix of national democrats and businessmen united on a statist and reformist platform. By 2006, the only national democratic party left in Our Ukraine was Rukh.

Our Ukraine was never anti-Kuchma, unlike the SPU and BYuT. Yushchenko could not go against Kuchma, whom he once described as a father figure.

It should therefore come as no surprise that after coming to power, Yushchenko was never able to initiate proceedings against Kuchma. The Orange Revolution's slogan 'bandits to prison', which Yushchenko repeatedly used himself during the 2004 presidential campaign, undoubtedly included Kuchma as one of the aforementioned 'bandits'.

After coming to power, Yushchenko never once morally condemned the Kuchma era and Kuchma's role in it. This, coupled with the lack of criminal charges, would suggest that Kuchma was granted immunity during roundtable negotiations during the Orange Revolution.

Prosecutor Svyatoslav Piskun became the guarantor of this pact, and no charges were leveled against Kuchma or his senior elites. There is no other explainable reason why Piskun was kept in his position until October 2005 when the president had a right to dismiss him 10 months earlier. Piskun even escaped Yushchenko's removal of the Tymoshenko government a month earlier.

This leads us to two conclusions.

First, Yushchenko and the business wing of Our Ukraine have always been closer to pro-Kuchma centrists than to the anti-Kuchma opposition (BYuT, SPU). Our Ukraine business leaders are pulled towards what they sought in 2001-2002, an alliance with the Party of Regions. Our Ukraine leader Yuriy Yekhanurov is more at home with the 'national bourgeoisie' in the Party of Regions than with the remainder of the Orange coalition (BYuT and SPU).

Second, it should come as no surprise that 'bandits to prison' was not acted upon. The lack of action in this arena has instead enabled the Party of Regions to come first by a wide margin, pushed Our Ukraine to third place, disillusioned many Orange supporters and damaged the concept of equality for all before the law.

Taras Kuzio is a visiting professor at George Washington University, Washington D.C. _____