

OP-ED

Bogeyman returns, but he is no longer a threat

3 December, Kyiv Post

Medvedchuk is spent as a political force in Ukraine

Kyiv is abuzz with rumors that Ukraine's arch-villain, grey cardinal and Darth Vader all wrapped into one – Victor Medvedchuk – is set to make a political comeback. The story reminds me of one's childhood when our parents would warn us to be good or else the bogeyman would come and get us in the night. Well, the bogeyman never came.

Medvedchuk's public political career is finished. Rumors about his return have more to do with Ukraine's deep-seated political crisis that has sadly spawned chatter along the lines of "It was at least better under [former President Leonid] Kuchma." Of course, it wasn't.

Nevertheless, such sentiments are understandable following four years of unfulfilled promises, one crisis after another, endless elections that return the same forces, incompetence and a total lack of leadership.

Opinion polls tell the story. In 2005-2007, President Victor Yushchenko dropped from being Ukraine's most popular leader to third place. Yushchenko had a brief resurgence in 2007, when he returned to second-place in popularity after he uncharacteristically showed some leadership skills. This year has been catastrophic for Yushchenko. Ukrainians must be wondering who his chief of staff, Medvedchuk protegee Victor Baloha, is really working for?

Now, polls show only 3.3 percent support for the president. Ukrainians would rather have ex-Prime Minister Victor Yanukovych and the current premier, Yulia Tymoshenko, solve their crises. Add to this rudderless ship three other factors – infighting among the elite, deteriorating relations with Russia and the global financial crisis – and it is understandable why Ukrainians are focused on conspiracy theories and the return of 'bogeymen.'

Is a return to “Kuchmism” possible, though? This is almost impossible because of the democratic breakthrough four years ago that we know as the Orange Revolution. Pro-Western political forces are divided and often inept, but nevertheless have won four elections since 2002.

Medvedchuk the bogeyman has long given Yushchenko sleepless nights. But this is more a product of the president’s world view. Yushchenko always had the “good czar, bad boyars” syndrome. He refused to support Tymoshenko’s campaign for Kuchma’s impeachment and, as president, he de facto gave Kuchma immunity. Yushchenko instead directed his wrath at Medvedchuk, Kuchma’s chief of staff.

Medvedchuk the bogeyman should be divided into two parts.

The first is his political force, the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine (united). The SDPU(o) entered parliament on two occasions, in 1998 and 2002, only by virtue of access to state-administrative resources. In 1998, the SDPU(o) was tipped just over the 4 percent threshold by buying votes transferred to it from the Agrarian Party. It failed to enter the 2006 parliament and did not even bother to run in 2007. It is finished politically.

There are unconfirmed rumors that the SDPU(o) is considering merging with the Party of Regions. Don’t hold your breath. There is no warmth between Medvedchuk and Yanukovych, as the latter will never forget that the former (with Kuchma) in effect “betrayed” him after the second round of the 2004 presidential elections.

The second factor, the lingering influence of a Byzantine political culture that became synonymous with Medvedchuk, is more important. One of the many disappointments of the Yushchenko administration has been the failure to change the nature in which politics is undertaken. Intrigue, backroom deals, cynicism, opportunism and a Byzantine approach continue to dominate.

An example was the removal of Arseniy Yatsenyuk as parliamentary speaker, made possible by 10 votes donated by Baloha. It is the president’s tolerance of Baloha’s Byzantine antics, despite the fact that they undermine his popularity, that continues to leave Medvedchuk’s influence in place. Baloha, a protege of Medvedchuk, is the quintessential product of Ukraine’s corrupt and criminal transition to a market economy in the 1990s. His home region of Transcarpathia, with its lucrative and

corrupt cross-border trade, was an SDPU(o) stronghold until 2004. Baloha was an SDPU(o) loyalist until business issues divided them in 2002. Then he switched to Our Ukraine. Baloha's loyalties remain to himself, not to Yushchenko.

During the late Kuchma era and following the Orange Revolution, former senior SDPU(o) members moved into all three major political forces: the Party of Regions, the Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko and Our Ukraine. It remains unclear why Tymoshenko, Ukraine's most popular politician, needs the services of such discredited former SDPU(o) politicians.

Medvedchuk's alleged role is two-fold: first, as a lobbyist in the Supreme Court and second, as a go-between with Russia. The fierce battles between political forces have led to abuse of the rule of law by all sides. As for go-betweens, anybody who knows Tymoshenko also knows that her supreme self-confidence means that she needs no go-betweens to deal with domestic and foreign interlocutors.

The bogeyman is not the threat to Ukraine's young democracy. The threat comes from the inability of pro-Western democratic forces to remain united and to decisively break with the Kuchma era. Medvedchuk will continue to have a role in Ukrainian politics only as long as presidents continue to employ the likes of Baloha. Medvedchuk already returned two years ago to Ukrainian politics, renamed as Baloha and re-employed by the president.

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