



Yushchenko's people keep getting their facts all wrong

Apr 15 Taras Kuzio

Iryna Vannikova, ex-President Viktor Yushchenko's press secretary, laments the alleged pro-Yulia Tymoshenko "bias" in the Kyiv Post (April 8, ["Kyiv Post editorial unfair to Yushchenko, distorts truth"](#)).

Any reader should know that the newspaper has never been a mouthpiece for ex-Prime Minister Tymoshenko or her eponymous bloc. In the Jan. 17 first round of this year's presidential elections, the Kyiv Post supported Sergei Tigipko and only backed Tymoshenko in the second round.

Let's discuss the "hearsay and speculation" and "historical revisionism" (a very Soviet term) that Vannikova found so offensive in the Kyiv Post editorial (March 25, ["No thanks, Yushchenko"](#)).

Support for democracy. Yushchenko never understood that democracy is not merely free elections and media pluralism, but many interlocking factors -- such as anti-corruption, adherence to the rule of law and a government that inspires trust in state institutions.

The rule of law is in worse shape today than in 2005, when Yushchenko took office. Trust in state institutions is at an all-time low. A 2009 survey by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems found that all Ukrainian politicians had negative ratings, but Yushchenko's was the worst, with 83 percent.

Throughout his presidency, Yushchenko played down opinion polls as unimportant. He belittled Ukrainian voters as not politically astute enough to understand his policies. Not listening to polls during one's presidency has consequences during elections, as seen in the 5 percent of votes received by the incumbent in his failed re-election bid. Even after total economic collapse and hyperinflation, ex-President Leonid Kravchuk was able to reach the second round in 1994 and receive 44 percent.

Rule of Law. To argue that Yushchenko was unable to change general prosecutors is misleading. He inherited Sviatoslav Piskun and could have replaced him in February 2005, when Tymoshenko received the support of 373 deputies for the position of premier. Yushchenko kept Piskun until October 2005, when he replaced him with Oleksandr Medvedko, who remained until the end of his presidency.

Neither the tenures of Piskun nor Medvedko showed Yushchenko to be interested in the rule of law or reducing corruption in the judiciary. Both had links to the ruling Donetsk clan: Piskun entered parliament in 2006 and 2007 with the Party of Regions. Medvedko is widely regarded to be a Party of Regions loyalist.

Yushchenko was the only president who served under two constitutions, one presidential and the other parliamentary. To argue that he had insufficient power is to ignore the fact that the 1996 presidential constitutional remained in place throughout 2005.

Removing Piskun or Medvedko simply required political will that Yushchenko lacked.

Another example of how the Constitution was infringed was when Viktor Baloga, a civil servant who headed the presidential secretariat, was permitted to de facto act as vice president in 2008-2009. Baloga's vitriolic attacks on Tymoshenko became an embarrassment. Many asked: How could somebody so intellectually challenged and corrupt as Baloga dominate half of Yushchenko's presidency? As Anders Aslund wrote in his 2009 book, "How Ukraine Became a Market Economy and Democracy," Baloga "cleansed" the presidential secretariat "of all liberals and Orange revolutionaries."

Corruption. Yushchenko, unlike Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, never showed political will to fight corruption. Yushchenko's legacy is even higher levels of corruption than in 2004, ex-President Leonid Kuchma's last year in office. Officials and politicians could get away with corruption because nobody was seen to be in charge of the country.

Generator of reforms. As Aslund wrote in his book, Yushchenko "never gave Tymoshenko a chance to govern, and he achieved a complete government stalemate." Yushchenko vetoed nearly all Tymoshenko's policies. Yushchenko's image suffered when he sought to undermine the Tymoshenko government from its inception.

He had first demanded that his Our Ukraine party receive half of the ministerial portfolios, then refused to work with this government. The president's criticism of the government's handling of the 2009 flu epidemic, for example, ignored the fact that the minister of health was from Our Ukraine's quota! As to privatization, Yushchenko backed the domination of socialists in the State Property Fund. As Aslund wrote: Yushchenko "spoke like an old-style socialist, even vetoing Tymoshenko's decree allowing private sales of land as contrary to the constitution."

Energy. The opaque gas intermediary RosUkrEnergo was indeed established in 2004 to replace Eural Trans Gas. But it did not have to be retained in the January 2006 contract by a government led by Our Ukraine's Yuriy Yekhanurov. Then- Defense Minister Anatoliy Hrytsenko recalled how the 2006 gas agreements were hidden even from members of the government such as himself.

Yushchenko and Baloga sought to undermine gas negotiations undertaken by Tymoshenko in late 2008 and criticized her plans to remove RosUkrEnergo. A united negotiating position should have been formed in Kyiv. Instead, the public watched as Yushchenko hurled vitriolic condemnations of the prime minister while she was in Moscow.

It is unclear how Yushchenko can claim credit for the March 2009 agreement with the European Union to modernize Ukraine's pipelines. It was the Tymoshenko government that negotiated and signed it.

European ties. Europe's fatigue with Ukraine set in during the last half of Yushchenko's term. He received fewer invitations to visit European countries, damaging Ukraine's European integration prospects. The president's biggest foreign policy failure was to not use the support he received from President George W. Bush in Washington, D.C., in April 2005 and the 2006 window of opportunity for Ukraine to obtain a membership action plan into NATO at the summit in Riga, Latvia.

Unfortunately, Yushchenko's obsession with Tymoshenko was more important to him than Ukraine's national security. Yanukovich returned as prime minister in 2006, signaling the end to Ukraine's NATO

membership ambitions, even after Tymoshenko regained office in 2007.

Yanukovich defeated Tymoshenko in the Feb. 7 election for many reasons, including the global economic crisis. But she lost by only 3.48 percentage points. She might have won had Yushchenko not waged such a vicious campaign against her. He portrayed her as “un-Ukrainian” and “unpatriotic.” He smeared her with old criminal accusations. He accused her of “treason” in August 2008, mobilizing the Galician nationalist vote against Tymoshenko.

Ultimately, Tymoshenko’s electoral chances were also undermined by Yushchenko’s failure to punish the organizers of the presidential election fraud in 2004, allowing for Yanukovich’s revenge.

For all of this, Yushchenko could well go into history as undermining the two goals that he takes credit for: bringing democracy and national identity to Ukraine.

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