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Yushchenko's the lamest of lame ducks

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Taras Kuzio

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Ukraine's President, Viktor Yushchenko, seemingly does not take much interest in opinion polls, unlike his Western counterparts. Polls and ratings do not completely control the lives of Western leaders but they are nevertheless still seen as an important barometer of the health and vitality of a leader. More importantly, polls show a Western leader if he still has a public mandate to rule his people.

If President Yushchenko truly wished to build a European democratic country indeed, rather than only in word, he could not ignore his critically low public ratings. In a European or North American democracy, public ratings of under 10 percent, as in Viktor Yushchenko's case, would be considered a national crisis. In Ukraine such ratings continue to be ignored – as they were during Leonid Kuchma's presidency.

In Britain, the collapse in Prime Minister Gordon Brown's ratings have led to calls by even Labour Party supporters for him to be replaced because of the fear that his low popularity will lead to Labour losing the next elections. Well-known Guardian commentator Jonathan Freedland wrote recently that "we got Brown wrong. He is simply not up to the job." Would Freedland believe that Yushchenko "was up to the job"?

Former French President Jacques Chirac and U.S. President George W. Bush, like Western leaders in general, become lame duck leaders after either many years in office (Chirac) or, as in Bush's case, at the end of their second terms. Yushchenko's case is unique in three ways. Yushchenko has managed to become a lame duck president faster than Kuchma and yet acts as though he has the moral right to give orders to the Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko. Just to remind readers, the Tymoshenko bloc received more than twice as many votes in last year's elections as the president's Our Ukraine group.

Firstly, Yushchenko was elected with a huge revolutionary mandate. Not only did he win by an 8 percent margin, he also had a reserve of support among his opponents, as support for change was widespread, with more than 70 percent of Ukrainians backing this mood. Yushchenko's mandate for change was far higher than that for Nicolas Sarkozy in France, whose 53 percent victory was only 6 percent more than his Socialist rival's 47 percent. Britain's two crucial elections associated with change gave 7 percent victory to the Conservatives in 1979 (when Margaret Thatcher won) and a 12 percent victory to New Labour in 1997 (when Tony Blair won). Bush was elected in the U.S. with even lower majorities of only 1 percent in 2000 and 3 percent in 2004. Compared to British, French and U.S. election results, Yushchenko therefore had a relatively large mandate for change that he never used.

Secondly, Yushchenko has below 10 percent ratings already in the middle of his first term. Such a collapse in support would trigger a national crisis in a Western democracy. There would be mass resignations of his advisers and staff. In a Western democracy there would be a search for who was responsible for this collapse in support. It would be incomprehensible for the head of the presidential staff to remain in place after he presided over such a critical collapse in the president's support. In a Western democracy, Viktor Baloha, Yushchenko's chief of staff, would himself feel morally bound to resign.

Thirdly, it is rare for European and North American leaders to receive Ukrainian-style critical ratings of below 10 percent. When Chirac and Bush have less than 30 percent approval they are considered to be lame duck presidents. How then, should a president be described with less than a third of Chirac's and Bush's popularity? What would French and American media outlets be arguing if Chirac and Bush's ratings were not 25-30 percent, but only 7 percent. A rising tide of French parliamentarians and American congressmen would be demanding early elections.

More incredulously, no Western democracy would continue to act as though nothing unusual had happened if the president's ratings had collapsed six fold in four years, as they have with Yushchenko. To sidestep such an important factor would be to ignore a profound crisis in the country's leadership.

Yushchenko's lame duck status is not only inter-related to the country's perennial domestic crises since September 2005 when he removed the Tymoshenko government. The president's lame duck status is also exercising a negative influence on Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Western leaders and organizations have consistently stated for the last three years that the policies undertaken by the president's staff and the president himself have been counter-productive, as they have undermined Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO. The West has supported unity of the former Orange Revolution allies in the interests of promoting policies in support of reform and reducing corruption. Instead, the president's policies have undermined Orange unity in September 2005 and following the 2006 and 2007 elections and these have contributed to reducing his support both inside and outside Ukraine.

Western governments and organizations have been slower than Ukrainians to transform Yushchenko into a lame duck president. Nevertheless, the last seven months of presidential attempts to undermine the Tymoshenko government have transformed attitudes in Brussels, London and Washington from that of seeing Yushchenko as a hero of the Orange Revolution and the candidate of reform into the nemesis of conservative counter-revolution.

This was clearly stated during last week's Brussels meeting of the center-right European Peoples Party. At the meeting's concluding press conference, EPP President Wilfried Martens said, "On behalf of the EPP I would like to state our solidarity with the course undertaken by the Tymoshenko government, its anti-corruption and privatization program. I would also like to support Tymoshenko as the leader of the democratic coalition. We remain perturbed that there are attacks on the government and at the same time attempts to block the course of reform." President Yushchenko made things worse by snubbing an EPP delegation that visited Kyiv prior to the Brussels meeting.

Yushchenko is fast losing support in Brussels, London and Washington for the very same reasons he is losing support among Ukrainians; namely, in response to his duplicity in claiming to support "his government" while doing everything in his power to undermine it.

Worse still, the president fails to understand that using foreign media interviews to attack "his government" is received in a negative manner: it is simply beyond the pale for Western leaders to engage in such practices while traveling abroad. One could never imagine Prime Minister Blair attacking opposition leader David Cameron in an interview in *Le Monde*. Yushchenko has gone out of his way to attack Tymoshenko in recent Canadian, French and Spanish interviews, a course of action that rebounds negatively on him.

The lack of political crisis and scandal surrounding the president's below-10 percent ratings suggest that Ukraine is still a young democracy. The Orange Revolution brought Ukraine a step closer to democracy; for example, the country now has a free media. Yet, in Ukraine's free media, corruption scandals can be widely publicized without any criminal and investigative follow up taking place. Similarly, a president can become a lame duck without calls for the resignation of his senior staff and advisers and without public calls for pre-term presidential elections.

Yushchenko would show his true commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration by no longer continuing to act as though he had widespread public support and a public mandate to run roughshod over public opinion.

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