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Pro-Kuchma revisionism raises its ugly head

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By TARAS KUZIO, editor of the Ukrainian Analyst and adjunct professor in the Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada The most absurd revisionism rests on the argument that Kuchma “allowed democracy and all its freedoms to be secured”

Swedish economist Anders Aslund’s praise of former President Leonid Kuchma [Moscow Times, Aug. 28, “Leonid Kuchma Built a Prosperous Ukraine”] came as a shock to most observers of Ukraine. Yet it is a logical outcome from his often contradictory views of Ukraine’s post-communist development. It is perhaps the start of a new revisionism towards Kuchma’s decade-long legacy.

Revisionism is both ideological and very pragmatic. In a profile of Victor Pinchuk, Kuchma’s billionaire son-in-law, The New York Times on Aug. 8 reported: “To sustain his quixotic dream of securing Ukraine’s entry into the European Union, he has financed programs in Washington at the Brookings Institution and the Peterson Institute [of International Economics].”

It has long been discussed in Washington’s Ukraine-watching circles that Pinchuk made donations to two think tanks where Aslund [the Peterson Institute] and former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Carlos Pascual [the Brookings Institution] are resident fellows.

Aslund and Pascual regularly travel to the annual Yalta European Strategy (YES) summit in the Crimea. YES is a worthy non-governmental organization financed by Pinchuk that lobbies for Ukraine’s EU membership.

Its two negative aspects are that YES has a well known Russophile as the editor of its newsletter – Alexander Rahr – who has staunchly supported the Russian position on Georgia. The YES NGO and Pinchuk do not support Ukraine’s membership in

NATO. On both of these questions, Aslund and Pascual's positions are diametrically at odds with those of YES's editor and Pinchuk.

Ideologically, it is more difficult to find a basis for Aslund's pro-Kuchma revisionism.

Aslund credits Kuchma with creating a market economy in Ukraine. This is a curious claim as Aslund, a well-known proponent of shock therapy economics for post-communist transitions, has severely criticized the evolutionary, drawn-out reforms adopted under Kuchma. Of the six prime ministers during Kuchma's decade in office, Aslund has only ever described one (Victor Yushchenko) as a reformer committed to constructing a market economy.

Aslund does admit that Kuchma's "darkest period was from 1997-1999" (he means 1996-1999), when Pavlo Lazarenko and Valery Pustovoitenko were prime ministers. This was a very long "dark period" as it covered four of the five years of Kuchma's first term in office. Both Lazarenko and Pustovoitenko were close associates of Kuchma from Dnipropetrovsk, and the latter had the full confidence of the president to launch the NDP (People's Democratic Party) that he led as Ukraine's first party of power.

To give credit to Kuchma for having stabilized Ukraine's hyperinflation is curious. After all, it was Prime Minister Kuchma's government which unleashed hyperinflation in 1993.

Giving Kuchma credit for introducing the national currency (hryvna) in 1996 is also a new revisionism. Until now, Yushchenko as National Bank of Ukraine chairman has been credited with this success story.

Pro-Kuchma revisionism surprisingly ignores the rise of Ukraine's oligarchs under Kuchma. And yet, Aslund has been a strong critic of the fact that Ukraine's hijacked transition led to the entrenchment of an oligarchic class greater in proportion than that in Russia (see his article in Aslund and Michael McFaul's edited book "Revolution in Orange," published by Carnegie in 2006). Today, we can witness the outcome of the growth of oligarchs in Rinat Akhmetov being Europe and Eurasia's wealthiest individual (with \$31.5 billion in estimated wealth), despite Ukraine having little of the raw material wealth that Russia possesses.

Aslund largely glosses over the Kuchmagate crisis and the 2004 elections, two of the blackest stains on Kuchma's record, which supersede Lazarenko and Pustovoitenko. Law enforcement officials "were never able to identify those who ordered the killing" of muckraking journalist Georgiy Gongadze in 2000 because they never tried to investigate them under either Kuchma or Yushchenko.

Kuchma may not have ordered Gongadze's murder, but the Melnychenko tapes – if a true account of events – make clear that the ex-president wanted the journalist silenced. Had there been a real and independent investigation, Kuchma could have been criminally charged – as Yushchenko promised to do – or even impeached.

The most absurd revisionism rests on the argument that Kuchma "allowed democracy and all its freedoms to be secured." Kuchma's second term saw a drift towards autocracy and the entrenchment of the oligarchs, the introduction of illegal "temnyky" (instructions to the media on censorship), the illegal use of law enforcement pressure and violence against the opposition, and an attempt at securing the Donetsk clan (in the person of Victor Yanukovych) as Kuchma's successor.

Would Aslund's revisionism still claim Kuchma as the father of Ukraine's democracy if Yanukovych had been elected four years ago?

As president of Ukraine and guarantor of the constitution, Kuchma is ultimately responsible for Ukraine experiencing its worst election fraud in 2004. The climate of violence, fraud, media lies and violent threats led directly to creating the conditions conducive to Yushchenko's poisoning. Election fraud in the runoff election is suspected to have been managed by the presidential administration headed by Viktor Medvedchuk working with Prime Minister Yanukovych's shadow campaign headed by Andriy Kluyev. Both the presidential administration and government constitutionally became presidential responsibilities under Kuchma. Since Kuchma was a good micromanager, as Aslund confirms, he arguably knew and gave his authorization for the election fraud to take place.

That no special forces descended on protestors on the night of Nov. 28, 2004, and there was no bloodshed in the Orange Revolution is due to three factors: Kuchma's desire to save his skin, the refusal of Security Service officials, police and the army to intervene, and Western diplomacy. Aslund's revisionism is at odds with his

support at the time of the Orange Revolution and his criticism of fraud committed while Kuchma was president.

Aslund seems to believe that the end justifies the means. Because Kuchma's second term was allegedly the "most productive in terms of both legislation and economic growth," he can supposedly escape condemnation and responsibility for the Gongadze murder and mass election fraud in 2004.

It was not Kuchma who "created a functioning democracy," as Aslund's revisionism claims. The triumph of democracy in Ukraine in late 2004 was ensured by the one in five Ukrainians who participated in the Orange Revolution, a brave and poisoned presidential candidate (Yushchenko) and his orange ally Yulia Tymoshenko.

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