



Ukraine Gets Image Makeover  
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*Ukraine's international image has undergone a 180 degree turn during, and since, the Orange Revolution in November-December of last year. This gives grounds for optimism about Ukraine's future under President Viktor Yushchenko.*

### The Old Guard

There was little hiding the fact that Viktor Yanukovich did not project a positive image to Western governments or media. This should not come as a surprise, as his domestic image was also a factor that led many in the Ukrainian establishment to reject him. A victory by Yanukovich would have therefore made Ukraine's international image worse, not better.

Western media reports were critical of Ukraine, which in turn became defensive, a tactic it had imported from Russia. Western media pointed to Yanukovich's close ties to corrupt oligarchs and how his election would strengthen their hold over Ukraine.

Ukraine's return to a democratic path was therefore linked, in the minds of the West, to a Yushchenko victory. As Kuchma's chosen successor, Yanukovich, was seen as somebody who would continue policies that in Western eyes had proven to be disastrous. The fact that Yanukovich was backed strongly by Russia made his image worse in the West, because of Russia's drift towards autocracy under Vladimir Putin.

The election of Yushchenko, born in 1954, signifies a generation break and transition from the former senior Communist Party nomenklatura, who have ruled Ukraine since independence. The main progress in the careers of Ukraine's first two presidents, Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma took place in the 1970s under the arch conservative Soviet Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, who ran the country from 1972 through to 1989. Shcherbytsky allegedly committed suicide after the nationalist party Rukh was permitted to hold an inaugural congress. The Seventeen years that he was in power left its negative imprint on both Kravchuk and Kuchma, making them cynical and insensitive to their citizens.

By the 1970s, most leading members of Ukraine's Communist Party no longer believed in Marxist ideology. These ideologically amorphous ex-Communists led independent Ukraine until October of last year, a 12-year period during which they were unable to formulate a strategy for the country or decide in which direction Ukraine's transition would move.

This lack of clarity as to the domestic and foreign policy goals of Kravchuk and Kuchma obviously had an impact not only on politics and business, but also on Ukraine's international image. It became a nightmare for academics like myself to attempt to explain to students how Ukrainian foreign policy was formulated? Maybe this was because, as the joke went, the country was "pro-Russian" in winter and "pro-NATO" in the spring.

Constant wavering during the last twelve years projected an image both to Russia and to the West that Ukraine is not a "serious" country. This is one of the images that has now been changed by the Orange Revolution. You cannot get a more "serious" country when upwards of a million of its citizens are on the streets demanding basic democratic rights and calling upon the authorities to treat them like citizens, and not as "kozly" (pejorative prison term used by Yanukovych).

## Neighbors

Problems in projecting Ukraine's international image were confounded by two other factors. First, Russophilia in the West, particularly in what US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld called, "old Europe", is widespread. This problem is again dealt with to a great degree by recent events. As one Ukrainian politician said, it was not Kuchma's 2004 book that proved Ukraine was not Russia (title of book), but the Orange Revolution.

This revolution, which made the election of Yushchenko possible, guarantees that the paths of Ukraine and Russia will now diverge. Even the French newspaper *Le Monde* (December 2, 2004) was forced to admit that, "This society has demonstrated its capacity to denounce the Kuchma regime and seek an alternative political solution, while apathy could have moved the people, as in Russia, to do nothing."

Russia under ex-KGB officer Putin is moving towards an autocratic system; the New York-based Freedom House human-rights think tank recently downgraded the country's status to "Non-Free", the first time since 1992. Second, Ukraine's leaders indulged in a wide range of unsavory domestic, illegal and questionable international practices, which negatively influenced the country's image. There is little need to recall them, as the Ukrainian Observer's readers are undoubtedly aware of them.

Such practices will now come to an end under a Yushchenko presidency, which will close the gap between rhetoric and policies. Yushchenko's plans to introduce all manner of radical reforms and stem corruption are trusted by Ukraine watchers, international organizations, Western governments and potential investors. Yushchenko has strongly endorsed the Blue Ribbon Commission report, drawn up by the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment think tank and the United Nations Development Program, which outlines reforms in key areas.

Ukraine's Orange Revolution has been compared to other democratic revolutions that preceded it in Georgia (in 2003) and Serbia (in 2000). The analogy, though, is only true to a certain degree. Both Serbia and Georgia were failed states with bankrupt economies. Ukraine's economy, on the other hand, experienced the highest growth rate in Europe last year (12%). Ukraine has a "very strong financing position, current account surplus, rising reserves, good growth" and has regularly issued bonds, said Timothy Ash, head of Emerging Markets at London's Bear Stearns. Fund managers and potential investors began traveling to Ukraine in greater numbers in the second half of 2004, a process which has speeded up since the Orange Revolution.

This combination of Ukraine being treated more "seriously" as a country, of differentiating Ukraine's political-economic path from Russia, and of ending

questionable domestic and international practices, will positively influence Ukraine's international image in 2005 and the years ahead. The "West" (governments, international organizations and media) will treat Yushchenko's Ukraine far more seriously than they did Kravchuk's or Kuchma's. The fact that Ukraine has proved that it is not Russia will force the EU and NATO to treat its aspirations to join both structures far more seriously. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke has called for Ukraine to be given a MAP (Membership Action Plan) in November this year, the first step towards joining NATO.

### Prospects

A Yushchenko victory creates greater dilemmas for the EU than NATO. The EU is in a quandary, because it cannot ridicule Ukraine's aspirations, as it did under Kuchma and would have continued to do under a Yanukovych presidency. After giving the green light to Turkish membership, the EU has little choice but to eventually do the same for Ukraine. Ukraine's new deputy minister in charge of European Integration, Oleh Rybachuk, is optimistic that Ukraine can fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria, the steps needed to join the EU, within two years. If the EU continues to ignore Ukraine, he threatens to launch an Orange Revolution in Brussels!

By virtue of Yushchenko's high moral background and his commitment to reform in word and deed, the questionable practices of the Kuchma era will no longer be permitted. This will also influence Ukraine's international image in a positive manner. The Orange Revolution helped to transform Ukraine's image from that of a Eurasian, corrupt authoritarian regime ruled by oligarchs to a European country.

Americans, Canadians and Europeans were awed by the determination and commitment of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to stand in freezing temperatures in protest against a government that even former Kuchma adviser Oleksandr Volkov recently described as "banditry". The non-violent nature of Ukraine's Orange Revolution and the humor and optimistic image projected by the Orange Revolution also positively influenced how the "West" looked upon Ukraine.

Yushchenko begins his five-year term as Ukraine's third president with a great deal of good will, both domestically and internationally. We remain confident that he will fulfill our expectations. Ukraine has reached a crucial turning point in its history, and Yushchenko is the man to lead the country away from its Soviet past towards a European future.

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