

Viktor Yushchenko's Foreign Policy Agenda

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Viktor Yushchenko has trailed badly in opinion polls in the last year with ratings of less than 5 percent, but has benefitted from the collapse of Arseniy Yatseniuk's election campaign (rankings of candidates in 2008-2009: www.uceps.org/ukr/poll.php?poll_id=91). Yushchenko is now the main "Orange" competitor to Yulia Tymoshenko in Western Ukraine (EDM, October 16, November 3, 16, 20).

In foreign policy terms, Yushchenko is a different candidate to five years ago, when he presented himself as a centrist (patriotic) politician to broaden the appeal of national democrats like himself beyond their Western Ukrainian heartland (Ukrayinska Pravda, November 24). This strategy won Yushchenko the crucial swing region of central Ukraine and the presidency. Yushchenko's move away from centrist patriotism to nationalism in the 2010 elections echoes the retreat of Our Ukraine from central Ukraine, which won four Galician and Trans-Carpathian oblasts in 2006 and only Trans-Carpathia in 2007. Yushchenko's nationalist platform is only a threat to Tymoshenko in the three Galician, and to a lesser degree in the four other Western Ukrainian oblasts. Yushchenko will compete with the rising contender Serhiy Tihipko, Viktor Yanukovich's election manager in 2004, for third and fourth place in round one.

In the 2004 elections, Yushchenko's "Ten Steps to the People" election program never mentioned NATO, Trans-Atlantic integration or even the EU (Our Ukraine has also not referred to NATO in any of its election programs). The only mention of foreign policy was a vague reference to Russia and Belarus (but nothing on the CIS). This unwillingness to highlight Yushchenko's pro-Western orientation was an outcome of his 2004 centrist-patriotic platform that sought to appeal beyond western Ukraine (www.president.gov.ua/docs/10krokiv.pdf).

Yushchenko's 2010 election program also makes no reference to NATO but does, unlike in 2004, state: "Together with European neighbors, we will strengthen the Euro-Atlantic system of collective security" (www.cvk.gov.ua/pls/vp2010/WP0011). On the European Union, Yushchenko's 2010 election program calls for a visa-free regime and membership with the EU. The program overlooks the Free Trade Zone between Ukraine and the EU that will be signed next year.

Yushchenko has at least supported Ukraine's integration into NATO and the EU. Under the 1996 and 2006 constitutions, Yushchenko can appoint the Foreign and Defense Ministers, National Security and Defense Council (NRBO) secretary and Security Service chairman providing him with institutional control over Ukraine's security policy.

Four problems bedevil Yushchenko's foreign policy:

1. The translation of Kuchma-era rhetoric on trans-Atlantic integration into action requires a president to work together with a parliamentary coalition and government of like mind.

Addressing Yushchenko at the recent EU-Ukraine summit, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said, “I will speak honestly with you, Mr. President. It often seems to us that commitments on reform are only partly implemented and words are not always accompanied by action. Reforms are the only way to establish stability, and build closer ties with the EU” (Ukrayinska Pravda, December 4).

During Yushchenko’s five years in office there have been four governments, three of which have been “Orange.” Yushchenko has only had good relations with one of the four governments and with only one of the three “Orange” governments led by Yuriy Yekhanurov in 2005-2006.

2. The successful implementation of trans-Atlantic integration requires an understanding of the inter-connection between domestic and foreign policies, which Yushchenko has never understood. The consequences have been a domination of rhetoric over substance, as in the Kuchma era.

3. Yushchenko has taken one step backwards compared to Kuchma with regard to his mis-use of the NRBO, whose four secretaries were chosen not for their experience in trans-Atlantic integration, but for their value in battling unfriendly governments. All four pale in comparison with Kuchma’s NRBO secretaries, Volodymyr Horbulin and Yevhen Marchuk. The NRBO under Yushchenko has been used not to coordinate Ukrainian institutions on national security, but as an alternative government to Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovych.

4. In 2005-2006 the EU failed to rise to Ukraine’s democratic breakthrough because of a lack of strategic vision, enlargement fatigue and constitutional chaos. The US and NATO did rise to the occasion and a Membership Action Plan (MAP) could have been offered to Ukraine in Riga in November 2006. The US and other NATO members sympathetic to Ukrainian membership pushed for an “Orange” coalition to be established quickly after the March 2006 elections, which would have been followed by President George W. Bush’s visit to Ukraine in June and a MAP in November. Yushchenko’s hostility to the return of Tymoshenko as Prime Minister undermined this plan, which was ultimately undone when an “anti-Orange” and anti-crisis coalition was established in July. Prime Minister Yanukovych told NATO in Brussels two months later that Ukraine was not interested in receiving a MAP. From 2007 onward Ukraine’s trans-Atlantic integration was hamstrung by a combination of Ukraine and then Yushchenko-fatigue and Germany’s increasingly independent line in the EU and NATO and Russia-first foreign policy.

Three Ukrainian factors led to skepticism in Western Europe towards Yushchenko’s rhetoric on Trans-Atlantic integration. Frequent government turnovers negatively impacted upon the ability of three “Orange” governments to launch information campaigns in support of NATO membership which has remained at 20 percent throughout Yushchenko’s presidency (polls conducted between 2002-2009: www.uceps.org/ukr/poll.php?poll_id=46). Moreover, political instability and elite in-fighting was repeatedly raised by Germany as a concern. During the election campaign Yushchenko continues to hurl insults at Tymoshenko on a daily basis, calling her “homeless” and a “bum.” Finally, the Party of Regions alliance with Russian nationalist-separatists in the For Yanukovych! Bloc in the Crimean parliament led to the first ever violent anti-American/NATO protests in the Crimea. These de-railed joint military exercises with NATO that had peacefully occurred for a decade under Kuchma.

Yushchenko's 2010 election program is more pro-Western than in 2004, but following five years of a widening gulf between rhetoric and substance few Ukrainians believe in his ability to deliver on foreign (or domestic) policies. When giving their vote to Yushchenko, Galician Ukrainians do so out of a misplaced fear that Tymoshenko's mix of pragmatism and ideology means she has sold out to Russia (www.day.kiev.ua, November 12). In reaching this conclusion, they forget that Tymoshenko's 2010 centrist-patriotic election program is not fundamentally different to the platform upon which Yushchenko won the presidency five years ago.