

Washington warming up to idea of President Tymoshenko

15 October 2009

Taras Kuzio thinks the presidential race is the prime minister's to lose.

Washington is less excited about the Jan. 17 presidential election than it was five years ago. Gone is the optimism of a new fresh start and a firm belief in a democratic, pro-Western opposition confirmed by the mass uprising of Ukrainians for their democratic rights in the Orange Revolution.

Although it had produced tremendous sympathy throughout North America and Europe, it would be no exaggeration to say that Washington was probably the most captivated of all NATO and European Union capital cities.

This euphoria was clearly seen in Victor Yushchenko's triumphant visit to Washington in April 2005 (witnessed by this author). During one long day, President Yushchenko had the honor to speak to both houses of Congress, attend a reception hosted by the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute and an evening banquet in his honor by the Ukrainian-American diaspora.

Yushchenko began to lose his support and popular image starting in 2007. But, as in Ukraine, the critical year that destroyed his image and popularity in the West and Ukraine was last year. In 2007-2008, political crises, inter-elite conflicts, calls for elections and paralyzed state institutions led first to Ukraine fatigue and then to Yushchenko fatigue in Washington and other Western capital cities. The outcome of this is that, on the eve of the 2010 elections, Yushchenko is no longer discussed as a serious candidate in Washington (or Brussels, the seat of European Union government).

As one U.S. government expert on Ukraine told me: "He is on another planet," a reference to Yushchenko's image of not being in touch with reality. This is a poor personality trait for any politician to have, especially a leader of a country. U.S. government officials who have visited Yushchenko in the last two years have noted his detachment from reality.

Yushchenko's clean image of five years ago has also evaporated. U.S. government experts on Ukraine and experts in Washington's many think tanks now have no reservations in stating that they believe Yushchenko is corrupt. "Yushchenko had the opportunity to transform the fundamentally corrupt gas relations with Russia after the Orange Revolution. It is hard to

explain his embrace of the corrupt January 2006 gas agreements, unless people near him have a personal interest,” Ed Chow, an energy expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank, said. The prestigious Economist magazine and Andrew Wilson, senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, have also pointed to energy corruption as having undermined the Yushchenko presidency.

A perhaps bigger disappointment in Washington is that of First Lady Kateryna Yushchenko. As an American, it was assumed that she would have a positive influence on the president. Instead, it is believed by Washington experts on Ukraine and by the Ukrainian-American diaspora in the city that the first lady has had a negative influence on Yushchenko. She is, particularly, blamed for inflaming of his relations with Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. One will not hear a positive view about the first lady in most places in Washington.

A Ukrainian-American leader said that the first lady had “gone native;” in other words, she had become more Ukrainian than American in the course of her two decades of living in the country.

Washington is slowly evolving to a position where it believes that there are only two serious candidates: Tymoshenko and Party of Regions leader Victor Yanukovich. This does not mean, U.S. Helsinki Commission policy adviser Orest Deychakiwsky pointed out, that there is great enthusiasm for any of Ukraine’s presidential candidates. This makes the 2010 race very different from 2004, when Washington clearly was sympathetic for Yushchenko. “Looking at the alternatives that are available, she looks the most appealing,” a U.S. government expert on Ukraine said.

In 2006-2008, Tymoshenko’s Washington and European image improved remarkably for the better, as seen by her successful February 2007 visit to the United States and her numerous visits to Brussels. Washington is little different to Ukraine with regard to the reasons why Tymoshenko lost support in the spring when there were coalition negotiations with Yanukovich and attempts to change the constitution. These set back her reputation and generated a view that there is little difference between them all.

Such views are not static but continue to evolve. This is clearly seen in Institute for International Relations senior fellow Anders Aslund who, in 2005, was Tymoshenko’s biggest Western critic but is now one of her strongest Western supporters. This evolution of attitudes in Washington to Tymoshenko will continue in the course of the election campaign, especially after round one. Of the two main candidates (Tymoshenko and Yanukovich) the “momentum is currently moving in her direction in Washington,” Deychakiwsky said.

Tymoshenko is a “natural politician,” one U.S. government expert on Ukraine said, and she knows how to make every person in a room believe she is talking only to them. She is a “doer” and therefore has the potential to become, as Americans call them, a “transformational” president who could leave her positive mark on Ukraine through changing it for the better.

Of the main presidential candidates, some believe that only Tymoshenko has the possibility of changing Ukraine for the better. In the course of doing so, she could ensure that her name went down in Ukrainian history.

If this happens, her legacy would differ from Yushchenko's. There is a widespread view that his time in office was one of "wasted opportunities." In becoming a "transformational" president, Tymoshenko would be more likely to be elected for a second term (which Washingtonians believe is unlikely for Yushchenko). Yushchenko, like Leonid Kravchuk, will only go down in history as having served one term in office. Kravchuk entered the second round and won 44 percent of the vote; neither circumstance is possible for Yushchenko, who has up to 5 percent support at the moment, if polls are to be believed.

Of the major candidates for president, the best chance for implementing much-needed reform of the energy sector is probably with Tymoshenko.

Washington experts on Ukraine, such as Aslund, credit Tymoshenko with leading the government that took Ukraine into the World Trade Organization and that negotiated a \$16.4 billion standby agreement with the International Monetary Fund. Tymoshenko is also credited in Washington with removing the corrupt gas intermediary RosUkrEnergo and with agreeing to pay market prices for Russian gas.

Washington still has reservations about Yanukovich, especially after he strongly backed separatism in Georgia when the Party of Regions supported resolutions in the Ukrainian and Crimean parliaments to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Even pro-Russian Belarus did not go this far. Yanukovich may have employed U.S. consultants Paul Manafort for five years. But they have failed to change Yanukovich's image in the United States. As one Washington expert on Ukraine said: "Manafort will work for anybody. It is wrong to believe that he has links to the Republican Party."

You can hear occasionally from Ukraine experts in the U.S., such as Atlantic Council senior fellow Adrian Karatnycky and others that there is little to be concerned about from a Yanukovich election victory. They point to the election of "pro-Russian" Leonid Kuchma in 1994, which did not lead to radical changes in Ukraine's geopolitical orientation. In any event, Karatnycky argues "this is not likely to be a pivotal election in which Ukraine will make a decisive geopolitical choice of either the West or Russia."

The comparison with Kuchma ignores three factors.

Firstly, Ukraine in 2010 is very different to Ukraine in 1994, when there was no organized pro-Russian political force except the Communist Party. Secondly, contemporary Russia is very different from the Russia of 16 years ago. So, too, is Boris Yeltsin different from the Vladimir Putin-Dmitry Medvedev duo. Thirdly, Kuchma and Yanukovich come from different backgrounds, the former from the Communist nomenklatura and the latter from working class and criminal. They also come from different ethnic backgrounds. Kuchma is Ukrainian, Yanukovich was born in Belarus and raised in Sovietized Donetsk.

Nevertheless, Karatnycky believes reforms have a better chance if Tymoshenko or Yatseniuk are elected, as he does not believe that Yanukovich has a firm grasp of economic policy. While he does not believe that President Yanukovich would be "slavishly pro-Russian," Karatnycky also remains concerned by the influence of the pro-Russian wing in the Party of Regions.

Yatseniuk has not made an impression on Washington and it is too late for him to do so. As a U.S. government expert said, he has not caught Washington's imagination in the same manner as Yushchenko had five years ago. When Yatseniuk first presented himself as a candidate last year, he was seen as a potential representative of a new pro-Western, younger generation.

Today, Washington does not know what Yatseniuk stands for (perhaps he doesn't know himself?). Yatseniuk "has no clear focus," has generated a "healthy degree of skepticism," as one expert said.

Skepticism has grown after Yatseniuk's lackluster performance at the September summit of the Yalta European Strategy, which was attended by Washington, D.C. Ukraine experts, such as Aslund and Ambassador Steven Pifer. American and European guests at the summit came to the same conclusion that -- of the three candidates who spoke -- Tymoshenko was by far the most polished, professional and convincing.

There is a widespread belief in Washington that Yatseniuk began his election campaign too early and that it is therefore now in trouble. In Yalta, Yatseniuk's attempt at showing he was a "tough guy" fell flat on Americans and Europeans.

Yatseniuk is also seen as too arrogant, especially for somebody who has only turned 35, a trait in evidence in the answers he gave at a luncheon in Washington when he was foreign minister.

Washington opinion is increasingly moving towards two viewpoints.

First is the view that the Jan. 17 presidential election will be mainly a contest between Tymoshenko and Yanukovich.

Secondly, Ukraine experts, such as professor Paul D'Anieri believe that Tymoshenko is likely to win the second round. Karatnycky agrees, believing that, despite the economic crisis, she will likely win support from "second echelon" candidates (Sergiy Tigipko, Yatseniuk, Anatoliy Grytsenko) in the three weeks between rounds one and two.

Taras Kuzio is editor of Ukraine Analyst and a senior fellow at the chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto. He can be reached at tkuzio@rogers.com.