

With or without Baloha, Yushchenko's unelectable

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Taras Kuzio writes that President Victor Yushchenko never made good on his 2004 Orange Revolution promises, so he will face the wrath of the voters.

Spin doctoring seems to be ever-present in contemporary politics. The (New) Labor government in Britain under Prime Minister Tony Blair was a master at spin doctoring as was the George W. Bush administration in the run-up to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Myron Wasyluk's "What did Yushchenko gain from Baloha?" [Kyiv Post, May 22, 2009] is an example of spin doctoring Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko's record. The objective reality of Yushchenko's four-and-half-years in office is very different than what Wasyluk wrote. On May 22, at Interfax-Ukraine news agency, two well-known political experts, Yuriy Yakymenko and Ihor Zhdanov, nodded their heads in agreement when Kost Bondarenko said that "it was Yushchenko who had buried the Orange Revolution." Yakymenko and Zhdanov both worked on Yushchenko's 2004 program at the Razumkov Center. Yakymenko is still there.

Wasyluk alleges that ex-presidential chief of staff Victor Baloha had "limited intellectual boundaries" and "couldn't provide his boss the intellectual approach needed to unite the political elite." Yes, very true. But, Baloha's intellectual deficiencies were obvious from day one to everybody but Yushchenko. A former Agrarian Party leader told me that he knew it was the end for Yushchenko when Baloha came to work for him in September 2006.

Why then did it take the president nearly three years to reach this conclusion that was obvious to everybody else?

Baloha's "limited intellectual boundaries" proved to be "inconsistent with the strategic vision of his former boss." The president has never had a strategic vision and ignored his election program after coming to office (as do nearly all Ukrainian politicians). It is not sufficient you have a "vision" – one also needs leadership qualities to instill it into reality.

The president "tasked Baloha with developing a plan to unravel the [ex-Prime Minister Victor] Yanukovich government." This is not within the competence of a president, according to the Ukrainian constitution. Whether we like Yanukovich and his anti-crisis coalition is secondary to the fact that it was a legitimate government and coalition. The Western view is that the April 2007 decree to disband parliament was unconstitutional. Yushchenko has proven unable to work

with three out of four governments on his watch, two led by Yulia Tymoshenko and one led by Yanukovich.

Arseniy Yatsenyuk was removed as speaker in November 2008 by a vote only made possible with members of parliament loyal to Baloha's United Center Party. If Yushchenko is correct in claiming he knew nothing about Baloha's intentions, then his chief of staff's insubordination should have cost him his job. If Yushchenko did know about the plan to remove Yatsenyuk, then he is duplicitous.

Wasylyk brings up the old canard about "Tymoshenko's populism." Two Tymoshenko governments have largely sought to implement Yushchenko's 10 Steps and 14 draft decrees (see below), the basis of his 2004 election program. The Tymoshenko government's February 2005 program began with the words: "The government program is based on, and develops the basis of, the program of Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko's '10 Steps towards the People'.

Yushchenko's election program, developed by then-Razumkov Center President Anatoliy Hrytsenko and his think tank, which went on to become an analytical-research department within Yushchenko's election campaign, is social-populist. In addition, the program includes no "vision of Ukraine's integration into NATO and the European Union and nothing on Ukrainian nation-building issues, such as language, culture and historical memory, except a nebulous promise to 'promote spirituality.' Instead, the program includes a defense of the right to use Russian, a populist call to withdraw troops from Iraq and a call for good relations with Russia and (strangely) Belarus.

The Tymoshenko policy most criticized as "populist" was the government's return of bank deposit savings last year. The bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko had promised this in its 2007 election program, and the government took action to honor the election promise. This led to a rise in the popularity of Tymoshenko to first place among Ukrainian politicians. This should send a signal to Ukrainian politicians that, if they implement their election programs, they will receive popular support.

The policy of returning Soviet bank deposits was draft decree No. 2 in Yushchenko's 2004 election program. The decree is very detailed and outlines how businessmen who privatized enterprises in the 1990s at knock-down prices would pay a one-off surcharge tax that would be used to repay the bank deposits. Yushchenko forgot about this election promise, as he did about most of his other promises, and he is now less popular than Leonid Kuchma was after a decade in office.

The January 2008 letter requesting a membership action plan from NATO was signed by Yushchenko, Tymoshenko and Yatsenyuk. Tymoshenko and Yatsenyuk have since both stated that they did not think it was a good policy move, as it was not based on realistic objectives; Ukraine was never going to receive a MAP at the NATO Bucharest summit.

As to Wasylyk's claim that Tymoshenko is pushing back on NATO, this may be indeed the case but a slow-track policy of seeking NATO membership is now the policy of Tymoshenko and Yatsenyuk. Ukraine has always complained that it needed a "signal" from the West about

membership prospects in NATO and the European Union. NATO gave that signal in 2005-2006 and Ukraine could have received a MAP in Riga in November 2006 (on the back of a June visit to Ukraine by President Bush). The only obstacle that prevented this was Yushchenko's unwillingness to see Tymoshenko return as prime minister after the March 2006 elections. Historians will write that it was Yushchenko who buried NATO in Ukraine.

Another canard developed by Wasylyk is that of "populism" of greater social spending by the second Tymoshenko government. Yushchenko's 2004 '10 Steps' explains that "social programs are not a devastation to the budget, but investments in the people, in the country and the nation's future." Yushchenko pledged in step two that if he is elected: "My action plan will ensure priority funding of social programs. The way of finding budgetary money for this purpose is easy: not to steal, not to build luxurious palaces and not to buy expensive automobiles."

Why has Wasylyk – who worked on Yushchenko's 2004 program – never condemned Yushchenko's '10 Steps' and 14 draft decrees as "populist"?

Baloha's "usefulness" to Yushchenko has never been evident to Ukrainians or the West. In 2007, Yushchenko was the second most popular politician in Ukraine with 15-17 percent support. Such a level of support could have won him a place in the second round of the presidential elections.

By May 2009, the month of Baloha's resignation, Yushchenko was Ukraine's sixth most popular politician (lower than even Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn and Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko), with only 3 percent support and no possibility of winning a place in the second round.

Yushchenko will therefore find it impossible to "re-connect with the millions of voters who are his electoral base." Political consultant Volodymyr Fesenko told me that one third of Ukrainians do indeed share Yushchenko's "values" but his problem is that they do not believe he can implement them. This is because polls show that less than 5 percent of Ukrainians believe Yushchenko has "leadership qualities" and over three quarters of Ukrainians do not, therefore, believe he should stand in the elections.

The main battle in the first round of the elections will be between Tymoshenko and Yatsenyuk. Yanukovich will sail into round two as he has no competition in eastern-southern Ukraine.

In round two, Yanukovich will hope he can face Yatsenyuk with whom, according to Komentarii (May 22), he has already done a deal through Ukrainian billionaire Rinat Akhmetov whereby the loser receives the post of prime minister. Yanukovich will face greater competition in round two from Tymoshenko who has alternative candidates for prime minister.

Yushchenko's presidency will forever be remembered as one of lost opportunities. As a Ukrainian-Canadian told me recently: "Yushchenko could have become Ukraine's George Washington." No amount of spin doctoring will alter the fact that he has failed the Orange Revolution.

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Victor Yushchenko's 2004 Election Program

Ten Steps Towards the People

1. Create 5 million jobs.
2. Ensure priority funding for social programs.
3. Increase the budget by decreasing taxation.
4. Force the government to work for the people and battle corruption.
5. Create safe living conditions.
6. Protect family values, respect for parents and children's rights.
7. Promote spirituality and strengthen moral values.
8. Promote the development of the countryside.
9. Improve military capabilities and respect for the military.
10. Conduct foreign policy that benefits the Ukrainian people.

14 Draft Decrees

1. Promote social defense of citizens.
2. Take steps to ensure the return of lost savings to citizens.
3. Increase support for child allowance.
4. Establish the criteria for analyzing the activities of heads of local state administrations.
5. Reduce the terms of military service.
6. Create a system of people's control of the activities of state authorities.

7. Struggle against corruption of high-ranking state officials and civil servants in local governments.
8. Reduce the number of inspections of businesses and ease their registration process.
9. Withdraw peacekeeping troops from the republic of Iraq.
10. Defend citizens' rights to use the Russian language and other minority languages in Ukraine.
11. Ensure the basis for good relations with Russia and Belarus.
12. Ensure the rights of the opposition in Ukraine.
13. Adopt first steps to ensure individual security of citizens and to halt crime.
14. Strengthen local government.