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Timely analysis and commentary on geopolitical developments in Eurasia

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[Leonid Kuchma Tells It Like It Is](#)



By Taras Kuzio

Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine's longest serving president (1994-2004), published some, at times, rambling memoirs entitled, *Posle Maydana. Zapysky prezidenta 2005-2006 (After the Maidan: The President's Writings 2005-2006)* (Vremya, Moscow and Dovira, Kyiv, 2007). Although datelined after he left office, the 700-page book deals with the last two decades of Ukrainian history.

In his book, Kuchma barely touches the contentious issues surrounding his presidency, such as massive high level corruption and the murder of journalist Georgi Gongadze. He continues to claim the Kuchmagate scandal was a Western (i.e. US) backed conspiracy to replace him with Yushchenko, which he believes came to fruition in 2004 (p. 684).

Kuchma claims that by the last year of his presidency, relations between business and politics had become "normal." Capital that previously fled abroad had begun to return and work for the Ukrainian economy, and big business had begun to pay taxes and desire a transparent and stable system (pp. 192-193). He replies to the accusation of building an "oligarch country" by claiming that "another type of regime, other than the nomenklatura-oligarch system, could not have come into existence" in the 1990s (p. 221). "Ukraine is not the Baltics. It did not feel itself to be occupied territory or a colony. There were still strong pro-Soviet feelings" in 1991, Kuchma pointed out (p. 291), meaning the pro-Western opposition could not have won the presidential elections.

Besides serving as a defense to the criticisms leveled against Kuchma's presidency, the memoirs reveal the ideological differences between Kuchma and his successors, Presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich.

Firstly, on national democrats and Yushchenko:

- Kuchma praises former political prisoner Vyacheslav Chornovil who was leader of Rukh and died in a car accident in 1999 as somebody “[i]ntelligent, respected [a]nd communicative” who was “without hatred in his soul.” None of the “Orange” leaders came close to his stature, Kuchma writes. He rejected accusations that he was murdered in a staged accident as he was not a threat to the authorities by 1999 (pp. 290-291).
- Kuchma appointed Yushchenko prime minister in 1999 when the country was nearly bankrupt because with a liberal image he was best suited to talk to the IMF in “one voice” as “Ukraine needed money” after the 1998 crisis (p. 681).
- Kuchma is dismissive of Yushchenko’s 2000-2001 government claiming credit for re-launching economic growth. Growth was a product of reforms, Yushchenko never undertook steps “without consulting with myself,” Kuchma writes, and his government program was copied from Kuchma’s 1999 presidential election program (p. 683). Kuchma points out: “Therefore, people have a normal question to ask: namely, if he saved Ukraine when he was prime minister then why did ‘he not doing anything’ when he became president?” (p. 265).
- Yushchenko is psychologically a “national-patriot,” but Kuchma personally claims in his memoirs that he is more of a nationalist. “If you want to know who is a real Ukrainian nationalist then it is I, former ‘red director’ Kuchma!” (p. 635). Kuchma’s nationalism, he believes, was more serious as it is underpinned by “national capital.”
- Kuchma portrays Yushchenko as weak, indecisive and a cynic. During a conversation in the 2004 elections, Kuchma asked Yushchenko why during his election campaign speeches he condemned the “criminal regime,” shouted “Kuchma out!” and demanded that “bandits” go to jail. Yushchenko replied that he should not take these election slogans seriously because, “This is politics, Leonid Danylovych.” Yushchenko used “revolutionary demagoguery” in a “cynical manner,” Kuchma believes (p. 684) and after once shouting “Away with this regime!” Yushchenko apologized, Kuchma recalls (p. 342).
- Kuchma points out that no “bandits” went to jail and Orange Revolution protestors, therefore, stood in the winter cold for 17 days for nothing. In September 2005, Yushchenko dismissed Tymoshenko’s government two weeks after describing it as the best Ukraine ever had. And following the crisis, Yushchenko signed a “memorandum of non-aggression” with Yanukovych (p. 376).

Although both are Russophones and were elected by eastern Ukrainians, Kuchma outlines numerous positions that differentiate him from Yanukovych.

- Kuchma told the Prosecutor-General’s office they were “Idiotyy!” when he heard of the February 2001 arrest of then-Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and described the criminal charges against her as “Absolute idiotism!” (pp. 167-168). Tymoshenko spent three weeks in jail before being released.
- Kuchma recalls Russian President Boris Yeltsin with warm affection (see below), while noting, “Yeltsin had a lot of real power, but he was not feared. His opponents and enemies (protyvnyky)” fought against him (p. 417), a problem that Yanukovych or Vladimir Putin do not have. One of the main

purposes of Tymoshenko's imprisonment was demonstrative to show how Yanukovich could deal with any member of the elites (see [interview](#) with Arseniy Avakov, a Tymoshenko loyalist who recently sought political asylum in Italy).

- Kuchma promised to “strive to give [the Russian language] official status,” but could not make the Russian language a state language because this is within the competence of parliament. Nevertheless, under Kuchma, Russian was never treated as a “foreign language” and “in most instances, [Russian] de facto was a second state language.” More importantly, Kuchma believes that making Russian a state language, as Yanukovich has promised, “would mean the de facto split of the country” (pp. 531-532).
- In 2003, Kuchma launched an international campaign to have the 1933 Holodomor recognized as “genocide,” but Russian Ambassador Viktor Chernomyrdin refused to apologize. Kuchma retorts that Russia, as the Soviet successor state, took on Soviet assets and debts – but not responsibility for the Holodomor (p. 415). Yanukovich, on the other hand, has adopted Russia's position on the Holodomor.
- As a centrist, Kuchma desired normal relations with Russia but without poking the bear in the eye, like Yushchenko, or betraying Ukrainian interests and being blasé about Russian threats, like Yanukovich. Kuchma understood Russia is a threat to Ukraine and that, “The threat of russification is a real danger [to Ukraine]” (p. 285).
- Kuchma cites a July 2004 opinion poll where two thirds of Ukrainians voiced their opposition to electing a president with criminal convictions (a reference to Yanukovich who spent two terms in prison for violent robbery) (p. 507). In 2010, Ukrainians elected him.
- Kuchma reveals that Moscow began issuing Russian passports to Crimean residents as early as 1994, but after he protested to Yeltsin the process was halted (p. 416).
- Kuchma goes into detail about the dispute with Russia in fall 2003 over Tuzla Island lying to the east of the Crimea. Kuchma recalls saying, “We will defend our territory as it is stated and outlined in our constitution” and mobilizing the military and other security forces to repulse Russian forces if they crossed Ukraine's maritime border (pp. 399-402).
- Kuchma is skeptical about the 1994 “security assurances” given after Ukraine joined the NPT and agreed to give up nuclear weapons. One reason is because Russia, as seen in the Tuzla case, is one of those “assuring” Ukraine. During the Tuzla crisis, Ukraine was rebuffed by four nuclear powers (under the security assurances) and NATO (under the 1997 Charter) when Kyiv sought to discuss the security threat. Of the nuclear powers “assuring” Ukraine, only China supported the country's territorial integrity. Kuchma believes that “any security support from the West will never materialize” (p. 405).
- Kuchma praises extensive cooperation with NATO and reveals that all members of the National Security and Defense Council (NRBO) voted for the July 2002 resolution that became a presidential decree outlining Ukraine's goal of NATO membership. Unlike Russia, Kuchma says his policies strove to break down negative stereotypes of NATO (pp. 460-463).
- Kuchma warned President Mikheil Saakashvili during a 2006 visit to Georgia that the Ossetian problem lies ahead and advised him when negotiating with Russia to do so from the principle of upholding Georgia's territorial integrity (pp. 188 and 234; see [EDM](#), April 17).

- Yeltsin was a democrat in “his soul,” and Kuchma recalls that at every meeting with him he was ready to “capitulate and reverse his position” (p. 472). The memoirs reveal how different Yeltsin was to Putin (and Kuchma to Yanukovych).

Kuchma’s centrist position between Yushchenko and Yanukovych could very well turn out historically to have been the best strategy for Ukraine’s national consolidation and Euro-Atlantic integration.