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Ukraine: the immobile state

Author:
Taras Kuzio

Summary:
The electoral defeat of the figureheads of the “orange revolution” of 2004 raises profound questions over Ukraine’s political future. A realistic assessment suggests that the views of both alarmists and optimists will be confounded, says Taras Kuzio.

The analysis of Ukraine’s prospects following the two-round presidential election [1] of January-February 2010 seems often to veer between pessimistic predictions of national disintegration and optimistic scenarios about successful integration. The articles of Ethan S Burger [2] (19 February 2010) and Adrian Karatnycky [3] (5 March 2010) are representative examples of either position. This article argues that a more realistic view would see Ukraine continuing to exist in the short-to-medium term as an immobile state - but that until Ukraine’s politicians seek national integration, political instability will continue and real reform will be indefinitely postponed.

In the era of Leonid Kuchma’s [4] presidency (July 1994-January 2005) that culminated in the “orange revolution”, Ukraine was often depicted as a country that sought in the post-communist era to do little more than unambitiously “muddle along”. Today, approaching six years since the political convulsion that ended Kuchma’s rule and propelled a new set of politicians into the frontline, there are fears that Ukraine will regress [1] to semi-authoritarianism, see its sovereignty diminish as relations with Russia deepen, and move from political instability to violent political conflict. These fears may be overplayed, but their very existence suggests that Ukraine’s political future seems to be a permanently open question that invites outlandish answers.

A state of flux

Amid a degree of fluidity in the post-election climate, some things are clear. Ukraine will not become a failed state, as Russian experts in wishful thinking predicted in the period of Viktor Yushchenko’s presidency (2005-10) (see “The Ukrainian-Russian Cultural Conflict [1]” [*Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 May 2009]).

The country’s state institutions [5] remain in place and, although devoid of public trust, remain sufficiently strong to maintain administration. Ukraine is also be unlikely to sink into civil war and inter-ethnic conflict; ethnic or religious hatreds do not run deep in the country. At the same time, the continued monopolisation of power under Viktor Yanukovych, the president elected in 2010, could have serious consequences if left unchecked (see Alexander J Motyl, “The Prorizna Street rebellion [1]”, 23 March 2010).

But it is important to ground such assessments on actual knowledge of the country [6]. Here, Ethan S Burger’s description of western Ukraine as “New Russia” and statement that Yushchenko finished fourth in the 2010 elections (he finished [7] fifth) do not inspire confidence. More generally, Burger’s citation of negative views of Yulia Tymoshenko [8] as a factor in her defeat fails to put this in the context of Ukrainians overall disillusion with politicians. For example, a survey by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems [1] (Ifes) in November 2009 found widespread low levels of public trust, including in “new faces” such as Arseniy Yatseniuk and Sergei Tigipko; the highest negative verdict was Viktor Yushchenko’s 83%, while all other politicians scored [1] 50%-69% on this measure. It is inevitable that by then Ukrainians would also view Tymoshenko critically; she was after all the first presidential candidate [1] who was also an incumbent prime minister during the worst recession for seven decades.

Burger writes that Yushchenko sought closer ties to the west to "produce a vibrant economy"; but the deeper motive was that (like politicians elsewhere in east-central Europe and the three Baltic states) he supported the view that Ukraine should "return to Europe" and escape the Soviet-turned-Russian sphere of influence. The choice was therefore more ideological than one of pragmatic economics.

Moreover, Burger's view that "Ukraine has not completely solved its nationality problem" suggests a highly rarefied view of national identity [9] (one matched by Adrian Karatnycky's forecast that linguistic and cultural cleavages "will be overcome in time"). Italy achieved national unity and independence in the 1860s but it still has deep regional divisions; polls show that over half of Italians think they are not a "single people", and 15% would even support the division of their country (see "Centrifugal forces [1]", *Economist*, 13 May 2010). Such examples could be multiplied.

Such nationality questions are very rarely "resolved", but tend rather to remain contested and in a state of flux. The Ukrainian case highlights the importance of nationality as a factor in post-Soviet political and economic transitions, one that did not exist in democratisation's "third wave [10]" in Latin America and was less prominent in its "fourth wave" in the former communist world. In any case, nationality and inherited political cultures often make getting the politics right more difficult; here, Ukraine's moderate nation-building policies since 1990 have ameliorated the threat of ethnic violence where the potential was greatest, in the Crimea.

A want of stability

In this respect, the result of Ukraine's presidential election [1] of 2010 represents a shift, for it brought to power regional elites opposed to the nationality policies that had been implemented over these two decades. The appointment of a Sovietophile as education minister [11] (Dmytro Tabachnyk) reflects the shift; so does President Yanukovych's more Russophile stance on issues that are sensitive to Ukrainian nationalists (such as the famine of 1933, the Ukrainian language, and the Black Sea [12] naval base in Sevastopol).

The change was signalled before [13] the election. Yanukovich's Party of Regions as well as the Communist Party did not vote for the law in November 2006 that recognised the Soviet politics of the Ukrainian famine [14]; on the very day of Yanukovich's inauguration (25 February 2010), the section on the famine on the presidential website [1] was removed. Yanukovch's election programmes in 2004 and 2010, and the Party of Regions's in 2006 and 2007, called for Russian to become a second state language. The Ukrainian and Russian presidents signed a deal on 22 April 2010 involving a trade-off between the purchase of Russian gas and extending the lease of Russia's Black Sea fleet that led to a riot in the Kyiv parliament.

These developments raise doubts over Adrian Karatnycky's optimism over Yanukovych's election and its impact on Ukrainian stability (see "Re-Introducing Viktor Yanukovych [1]", *Wall Street Journal*, 8 February 2010). Karatnycky writes that the last five years have "allowed time for the political transformation of Mr. Yanukovych and his Party of Regions" in three areas, including the way that "the oligarchs around Mr. Yanukovych became economically transparent" and "now see their future prosperity integrally linked to a reduction in corruption". But during the Yushchenko era the Party of Regions [15] always voted against legislation to combat corruption, and a 2007 report (co-authored by Karatnycky) highlighted the Party of Regions as one disinterested in combating corruption (see Jan Neutze & Adrian Karatnycky, *Corruption, Democracy and Investment in Ukraine* [1] [Atlantic Council of the United States, October 2007]).

Karatnycky believes that "the new president and the government he will try to bring into office will likely represent a broad-based mix of longtime Regions party officials, and competent financial and economic technocrats and market reformers - including some from the former Yushchenko team… The odds of a broad-based coalition are reinforced by the modesty of Mr. Yanukovych's victory, clear-cut though it was". Indeed, Yanukovych won by only 3%, was the first president to not win 50% of the vote and the first to be elected by a minority of Ukraine's regions [16] (eleven out of twenty-seven).

The government of prime minister Nikolai Azarov [17] is not broad-based but is composed largely of discredited retreads from the Leonid Kuchma period and other Sovietophiles, whose average age is 55 (the prime minister himself is 62). The Kyiv-based Penta Center for Political Studies [18] finds that eight out of twenty-nine cabinet ministers were born in the city of Donetsk or its region, and three more started their professional career there. This is also the first government in modern Ukrainian history [19] without a single woman (and is led by a figure whose attitudes to women prompt some to describe him as a "neanderthal").

Karatnycky writes that Yanukovych and the Party of Regions "have accustomed themselves and found success in the democratic rules of the game". This must be measured against the fact that

Ukraine's constitutional court was pressured to rule in favour of an illegitimate parliamentary coalition that has only 220 deputies (where a minimum of 226 are required) to include defectors from opposition factions; and that the constitution's ban on foreign bases (an article providing for a "temporary" twenty-year base from 1997-2017 excepted) was violated by the thirty-year extension in the new Black Sea treaty. Yanukovych's platform focused on the need for Ukraine to avoid Nato membership and to become a "non-bloc" state; but non-bloc states do not permit foreign military bases on their soil.

Karatnycky's view that Yanukovych would return Ukraine to the kind of balanced, multi-vector foreign policy pursued in the Kuchma era was premised on the assumption that if elected he would not implement his election programme. This was always unlikely. Yanukovich's programme was far more pro-Russian than Kuchma's had ever been (see Vladimir Socor, "Yanukovych Consistently Russia-Leaning in Ukraine's Presidential Election [1]" [*Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 22 January 2010]). Today, Ukraine's foreign policy has moved away from the national consensus of three previous presidents who sought Ukraine's integration into Nato and the European Union (see "Ukraine's Foreign Policy Turns East [1]" [*Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 23 April 2010]).

It is thus unsurprising to see the prediction that Ukraine would achieve "political stability and economic policy consensus" and thereby "move further toward fulfilling the promises of the Orange Revolution than the fractious rule of Yushchenko-Tymoshenko ever did" proving to be incorrect. The overturning of two decades of national consensus by Viktor Yanukovych and Nikolai Azarov confounds the optimistic expectation of an emergent national consensus on "key questions of national unity and sovereignty".

Rather, the election [20] of Viktor Yanukovych confirms the deep persistence of a neo-Soviet political culture inherited from Ukraine's past [21]. The mindsets, policies and mannerisms of the Yanukovych team cast severe doubt on Adrian Karatnycky's claim that "(In) the last twenty years, Soviet identity and regionalism have withered in Ukraine's East, Centre, and West".

A political dimension

Ukraine is routinely depicted as being divided linguistically between Russophones and Ukrainophones. In reality the differences lie in the realm of competing political cultures.

There are linguistic divisions in Ukraine but they are superimposed upon competing political cultures, with neo-Soviet political culture more prevalent in Russophone eastern-Soviet Ukraine. The surveys of national identity in Ukraine have always shown that Soviet identity is strongest in the Donbas [22] (Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and the Crimea - which are also the Party of Regions's strongholds.

The Ukrainian Centre for Economic and Political Studies has surveyed [1] Ukrainian, Soviet, and Russian national identities in Ukraine. Donetsk had the highest Soviet identity of all Ukraine's regions, with 37.1% of the region identifying their "cultural traditions" as Soviet (25.8% chose Ukrainian, and 22.5% Russian); the Crimea was a close second, with 32.2% declaring a Soviet identity (with 30% Russian, and 19% Ukrainian). In western Ukraine, the Soviet figure was 5.9% in Chernivtsi and 0.3-1.5% in Galicia.

Such affinities are reflected in the fact that Donetsk and Luhansk have 430 streets named after Vladimir Lenin, and sixty-seven carrying the name of the local separatist and Donbas communist leader Fedor Artem [23] (including one in central Donetsk). These have continued to remain in place despite the condemnation of communism under Viktor Yushchenko and his presidential decree ordering the removal of all communist symbols (see "Viktor Yanukovych's First 100 Days: Back to the Past, but What's the Rush? [24]" [*Demokratizatsiy*a, 18/2, Spring 2010).

The differences have a political dimension. Donetsk and Crimea have the highest rates of "negative voting"; that is, voters prefer to vote against than for a candidate or a party/bloc. The average number of negative voters across Ukraine is 28% of those who vote; the lowest figure is in western Ukraine (12.2%) and the highest in the Donbas and Crimea (42.8%). In Crimea alone, 73% are negative voters; the targets [1] are "nationalists", "American lackeys", and "orange" political forces.

The Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) and the Party of Regions each contribute to the continued influence of neo-Soviet political culture. The KPU's vote has declined from 20% in 2002 to less than 5% in subsequent elections, in great part because many of its former supporters switched their allegiance to the Party of Regions. The KPU has twice entered governments dominated by the Party of Regions, in 2006-07 and since March 2010. This situation is notably different from the 1990s, when Leonid Kuchma fought the KPU during Ukraine's transition to a market economy (defeating then KPU leader Piotr Symonenko in the 1999 elections, for example).

A capital issue

More broadly, Ukraine cannot be neatly divided into two linguistic groups because the situation on the ground is far more complicated. More accurate surveys show a three-sided pattern: Russophones,

Ukrainophones, and people who use both languages interchangably. The last group is particularly prevalent in central Ukraine, also the battleground fought over by western and eastern Ukrainian political leaders. In 1994 Kuchma won the presidency by winning eastern-southern *and* central Ukraine; in 2004, Viktor Yushchenko won the presidential elections [25] by victory in western *and* central Ukraine.

Ukraine's capital city, Kyiv, is a Russian-speaking city where 90% of children are schooled in Ukrainian. The city supported the orange protests, without which the revolution [26] would have never been successful. In the 2004 elections, 78% voted for Yushchenko in Kyiv (and 82% in the Kyiv *oblast*); in the 2010 elections, the equivalent figures for Yulia Tymoshenko were 65% and 70%.

At the same time, a mix of public apathy, low turnouts and divisions in the democratic opposition have allowed the corrupt and eccentric Leonid Chernovetsky to become Kyiv's mayor (see Clifford J Levy, "Is the Mayor Fit for Office. No Sure Answer [1]", *New York Times*, 14 August 2009). Chernovetsky backed Yanukovych in the 2010 elections out of fear that a Tymoshenko victory would lead to criminal charges against him. A draft law seeks to remove the right of Kyivites to elect their mayor - and effectively hand this to the state president - by combining the position with that of the head of the state administration in the city.

A permanent question

It is one thing to say that Ukrainians' attachment to the territorial borders of their country is inherited from the seventy-year history of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. It is another to argue, as does Adrian Karatnycky, that Ukrainians are nationally integrated. Donetsk and Lviv have little in common culturally or politically, while western Ukrainians and Crimeans have diametrically opposite viewpoints on practically every issue. These divisions are not fundamentally linguistic, although language is a factor, but rest on different political cultures, mindsets and worldviews.

In a mature democracy such profound regional divisions could be dealt with politically - as they have been in Canada, Britain, Belgium and Spain (with the European Union also available to play a moderating role in three of these cases). Ukraine's politicians are still new to the game of democracy, while the EU has been a bystander in Ukraine and has failed to provide [27] the country with a membership perspective. The effects are felt in Ukraine's political and civic culture (see Ivan Krastev, "Ukraine's Easy Work [28]", *World Affairs Journal*, 15 February 2010).

In these circumstances Ukraine is likely neither to disintegrate nor quickly to develop a common national identity [29]. The latter would require new politicians of a different calibre and the moderating and disciplining effect of the prospect of EU membership [30]. That cannot happen soon enough; for current policies will deepen Ukraine's divisions, ensure further political instability, and distract Ukraine from addressing its fundamental problems. Ukraine deserves better than to remain [24] an immobile and dysfunctional state. But until a new generation of politicians can resolve the issue of national integration, that melancholy situation seems all that is on offer.

Sideboxes

'Read On' Sidebox:

Taras Kuzio [31]

Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* [32] (Yale University Press, 2002)

Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine's Orange Revolution* [33] (Yale University Press, 2005)

Kyiv Post [34]

Askold Krushelnycky, *An Orange Revolution: A Personal Journey Through Ukrainian History [35]* (Harvill Secker, 2006)

Sidebox:

Taras Kuzio is a senior research fellow in Ukrainian studies at the University of Toronto, and editor of the bi-monthly *Ukraine Analyst*. His website is here [31]

Also by Taras Kuzio in **openDemocracy**:

"Ukraine: free elections, kamikaze president [36]" (27 March 2006)

"Ukraine: democracy vs personality [37]" (9 October 2007)

"Ukraine: beyond the orange coalition [38]" (17 July 2008)

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