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Ukraine without Viktor Yushchenko: a counterfactual history, or 'What if?'

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By Adrian KARATNYCKY

President Viktor Yushchenko's poll ratings are far from stellar. Indeed, many of his erstwhile supporters from the Orange Revolution days believe he has departed from one of the Revolution's key promises: the call to "punish the bandits" by vigorously prosecuting those guilty of corruption under the regime of former President Leonid Kuchma.

Particularly harsh are the assessments of the chattering classes, the blogs, and the numerous Internet sites, where opinions come as cheap as the remuneration. To judge by all the instant analysis, President Yushchenko's tenure in office has been a colossal failure.

How then is it that under President Yushchenko's term in office Ukraine has moved steadily toward the deepening of democratic processes, the independence of state media, and dynamic – if uneven – economic growth?

For a different perspective than that of the short-term memory span of the bloggers, let's step back and reconsider. And in reconsidering, let's make use of the newest, most provocative form of historiography – the counterfactual.

Counterfactual history is an exercise that historians use to answer "what if" questions. For example, in the 1930s Winston Churchill wrote a "what if" essay that looked at what would have happened had Robert E. Lee and the Confederate forces won the battle of Gettysburg in the

American Civil War. More recently, Harvard historian Niall Ferguson has added impetus to the genre, with his collection of counterfactual scenarios entitled "Virtual History."

To assess the Yushchenko contribution to Ukraine's transformation, let's employ our own counterfactual. Let's imagine where today's Ukraine would be without Viktor Yushchenko.

Let's start with the most basic factor: economic growth. As head of the central bank, Yushchenko was central to taming inflation, creating a national currency, helping Ukraine's economy sustain momentum in the wake of the 1998 Russian stock market meltdown, and contributed to an economic environment that allowed Ukraine's economy to turn around and begin a period of sustained growth.

As prime minister, he introduced sound fiscal principles and brought a national budget into macro-economic balance. As a result of his and Yulia Tymoshenko's efforts, the state was able to collect adequate revenues for energy and pay back long-term arrears to schoolteachers, medical care practitioners and pensioners.

While it is likely that without Yushchenko Ukraine would have eventually turned its economy around, such a turnaround would have come much later and Ukraine's standard of living would probably be much lower than it is today. That lower growth also would have meant the recent annual spikes in energy prices would have had a far more serious impact on GDP and Ukrainian consumers than they did in the context of a more prosperous and more dynamic economy.

Imagine, too, where Yulia Tymoshenko would be today had there been no Viktor Yushchenko. It was then Prime Minister Yushchenko who insisted on naming her his deputy prime minister for the energy sector, and in doing so placed her on the national political stage.

At the time, Tymoshenko's image was that of a rich oligarch recently aligned with the disgraced and corrupt ex-Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko.

It was her tenure in Yushchenko's government that allowed Tymoshenko to earn a reputation as an effective manager and a hard-hitting fighter against corruption in the energy sector.

In the end, Yushchenko was central not only to Tymoshenko's entry into high government politics, but also her image as a political martyr.

Because her forthright actions in Yushchenko's government provoked the anger of Kuchma-era energy oligarchs, Tymoshenko was eventually dismissed and later imprisoned, contributing mightily to her eventual popularity.

Thus, without Viktor Yushchenko, there would likely have been no Tymoshenko as deputy prime minister, and therefore no Tymoshenko as incorruptible and popular reform hero.

Imagine, too, what would have been the prospects for an Orange Revolution.

Without Viktor Yushchenko as a strong consolidating figure capable of bringing together a disparate array of political forces, there would have been no tight presidential race, no need for massive voter fraud and, therefore, no Orange Revolution.

At that time, in 2003-4, Yulia Tymoshenko's popularity was hovering at around 10 percent, and there was only one potential standard bearer for the reformers who were intent on reversing corrupt, authoritarian rule.

Again, Viktor Yushchenko was indispensable to the result, and only he could have mobilized the kind of mass turnout that was required to prevail.

So, without an Orange Revolution and a Yushchenko candidacy, power would have remained in the hands of the

Kuchma-era oligarchic clans. Moreover, there would have been no press revolt against the censorship and the 'temnyky.' And there would have been no rotation of power in Ukraine's then-authoritarian system.

Let's take our argument further. In a Ukraine without Yushchenko as president, there would have been no checks and balances on the avarice of the politicians in the Regions Party. The Regions Party itself would not have begun to diversify into distinct liberal, pro-reform versus old-school, authoritarian camps.

And in 2007, as legislators from the opposition were being seduced to join the party of power with promises of access to wealth and influence, without Viktor Yushchenko, there would have been no one in a position to use the power of the presidency to force new elections. Thus: no Yushchenko, no democratic coalition in parliament, no matter how fragile it looks today.

So, think of the "what if" of a Ukraine without Yushchenko. Ukraine today would have a poorer and far weaker economy and would be far more dependent on Russia. There would be no Yulia Tymoshenko as a preeminent reform leader. There would have been no Orange Revolution, no free media, no reformer as president, no new parliamentary elections, and no new democratic coalition. What there would have been, most likely, is a Ukraine in which a weak opposition faced a powerful incumbent authoritarian state in a system that more closely resembles the guided "democracy" we see in Russia.

All this is not to say President Yushchenko's tenure has not been characterized by some mistakes and a weak start. But much of that was occasioned by infighting within the Orange political camp at a time when the president's state of health was precarious and his energy level was down as he recovered from a near-fatal poisoning.

Still, although the politician and President Viktor Yushchenko has not been exempt from political errors, his decisions at key junctures have withstood the test of time. That's why my money is on the Yushchenko presidency. Like Lech Walesa, in the short term, President Yushchenko may be judged harshly by some of his contemporaries. But history will regard him as a major figure who helped steer Ukraine to sovereignty and freedom.

And, my guess is that as democratic stability, national consolidation and economic growth take root, the president will not need to wait for history's verdict.

In two years, Ukrainian voters will, likely, assess his time in office in a broad context. They will recognize his historic contributions and see in him a leader of centrist inclinations, who has steered the country from crisis to stability, rejected populism in favor of concrete measures that promote economic growth, worked diligently to forge a national consensus that could unite Ukraine's east and west, and sought compromise, not the settling of scores. If they do so, they are certain to reward him with a second term.

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Opinion » Op-Ed
Counterpoint to the counterfactual: another view of
Yushchenko's legacy

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If Yushchenko had acted the way the majority of the country had anticipated after the Orange Revolution, Ukraine would be on track to join the EU and NATO

By Taras KUZIO

The “what ifs” of history are a dangerous area to argue in support of Viktor Yushchenko’s alleged successes in his presidency.

Yushchenko’s popularity is lower than 20 percent, a level at which we would consider a Western president to be a lame duck (such as former President Jacques Chirac and current President George W. Bush). Usually a president becomes a lame duck in his second or subsequent term, not in his first term, as in Ukraine.

Here are some alternative what ifs of recent Ukrainian history from a blogger’s point of view.

If Prime Minister Yushchenko and his national democratic allies in parliament had withdrawn their support from President Leonid Kuchma during the Kuchmagate crisis and backed calls by the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc and the Socialists for his impeachment, Kuchma would have been forced to step down early. Until early presidential elections, Yushchenko would have been acting head of state.

Yushchenko, however, signed a document with parliamentary speaker Ivan Pliushch and President Leonid Kuchma denouncing the protestors as “fascists.”

If then Prime Minister Yushchenko had supported Deputy Prime Minister Tymoshenko, she may have not been arrested in January 2001. Yushchenko should have resigned in protest at her arrest.

If parliament had not voted no confidence in the Yushchenko government in April 2001, his government may have stayed on until the end of Kuchma’s term. Yushchenko would have

supported a presidential request to be Kuchma's official successor.

If Yushchenko had not agreed to constitutional reforms during the December 2004 round tables, there would never have been constitutional chaos in 2006-2007 and the disbanding of parliament in spring 2007. If the president had used his extensive powers under the 1996 Constitution to fulfill Orange Revolution demands during his first year in office, his popularity would not have collapsed. Yushchenko had millions of supporters on the streets of Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities, but betrayed them in signing deals at the round tables.

If the Tymoshenko government had not been removed in September 2005, and a memorandum had not been signed that month between Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych [Yuschenko's arch-rival in the 2004 presidential elections when Yanukovych was prime minister, Ukraine's current acting prime minister, and the leader of the Party of Regions – Eds. Note], the Party of Regions would never have doubled its popularity to come first in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

If the Tymoshenko government had not been removed, the Orange parties would never have been divided for 18 months. If a united presidential party had been created, Our Ukraine might not have reduced its popularity by 10 percent in the 2006 and 2007 parliamentary elections, in comparison to 2002.

If an Orange coalition had been created in 2006, the Communist Party would never have entered government in the Anti-Crisis Coalition [formed between the Party of Regions, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party – Eds. Note].

If Sviatoslav Piskun had not been maintained by President Yushchenko as Prosecutor General in 2005, the "bandits" may have gone to prison, rather than to parliament and government.

If Mykhailo Potebenko, Borys Kolesnikov and Serhiy Kivalov had been criminally charged, Yushchenko could never have rehabilitated them with state medals.

If Yushchenko had not protected Kuchma from impeachment and prosecution on two occasions, Kuchma would have been criminally charged with abuse of office. In the Kuchmagate crisis, Prime Minister Yushchenko refused to back calls for Kuchma's impeachment, and during the 2004 round table negotiations, Kuchma was granted immunity in exchange for Yushchenko's election as president.

If Yushchenko had fulfilled his promises made to the Council of Europe, he would have put the organizers of the murder of Heorhiy Gongadze on trial. Instead, one suspect has fled from Ukraine, another allegedly committed "suicide," and a third sits comfortably in retirement. Three lower-ranking policemen were charged in a closed trial.

If the president had heeded US calls to quickly create an Orange coalition after the 2006 elections, Ukraine would have been invited into a Membership Action Plan at NATO's Riga summit in November 2006. Ukraine would have then been on target to have been invited to join NATO at the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit. If Yushchenko had supported the Tymoshenko government and an Orange coalition in 2006, Ukraine would have joined the WTO earlier.

Ukraine would not have increased its dependency on Russian energy if it had not signed up to a 2006 gas deal that included the corrupt and non-transparent RosUkrEnergO intermediary. During the gas crisis, Ukraine conducted negotiations incompetently, while ignoring massive Western support for Ukraine and criticism of Russian policies.

If the president had fulfilled his 2004 election promises and implemented the promises given on the Maidan during the

Orange Revolution, Yushchenko would have a better chance of winning a second term in the 2009 elections.

President Yushchenko cannot win a second term in the 2009 elections by standing on his five-year record or by only relying on the support of Our Ukraine (which won 14 percent in the last two elections, but whose support has now fallen precipitously). He can only win a second term by aligning himself with either the Tymoshenko bloc or with the Party of Regions and by using negative campaigning depicting himself as the 'lesser of two evils.' Yushchenko's record in his first term is poor in the eyes of Ukrainian voters and, therefore, he has little choice but to repeat Kuchma's 1999 strategy of convincing voters to back the alleged 'lesser of two evils.'

If he chose an alliance with Tymoshenko, the Yushchenko campaign would again aim to block a Yanukovich victory (as in 2004, when many Orange voters voted against Yanukovich rather than for Yushchenko).

Alternatively, if he chose to fight the 2009 elections in an alliance with the Party of Regions, the Yushchenko campaign would target Tymoshenko's alleged "populism" and penchant for irrationality.

If Yushchenko were to align himself with the Party of Regions in the 2009 elections, he would lose all remnants of his Orange support and most likely lose the elections. Yushchenko would then follow Leonid Kravchuk in only having served one term in office.

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