

<http://www.moscowtimes.ru/stories/2004/06/30/008.html>

Wednesday, June 30, 2004 The Moscow Times

Why Russia Gains From a Yushchenko Victory

By Taras Kuzio

It is no big secret that Ukraine's new president will be one of the following: Our Ukraine leader Viktor Yushchenko, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych or Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko. These three candidates consistently lead in all polls.

Of these three candidates, whose victory would best serve Russia's national interests?

In the 1994 election, Russia unequivocally backed Leonid Kuchma who ran on a pro-Russian platform against the "nationalist" incumbent Leonid Kravchuk. The 1999 election in Ukraine was a rerun of the 1996 Russian presidential election, with the incumbent Kuchma beating the Ukrainian Communist Party leader.

In both elections, Russia's faith in Kuchma turned out to be misplaced. The outcome will be the same if Moscow backs Yanukovych, Kuchma's choice as successor, in the Oct. 31 vote.

Despite using pro-Russian rhetoric to come to power in 1994, Kuchma quickly shifted to a pro-U.S. and pro-NATO position. In 1999, Kuchma was re-elected on a pro-European integration platform. Just as in 1994, these slogans proved to be empty rhetoric: A year after re-election, Kuchma again reneged on his election promises and re-oriented Ukraine away from the West towards Russia and the CIS.

Russia might consider this a strategic victory. After all, it culminated in Ukraine signing the CIS Common Economic Space agreement last September. But, if this is how Russia views Kuchma's conversion, they would be as badly mistaken as they were when they believed his pro-Russian election platform in 1994. Kuchma deceived Ukrainian voters and Russia in 1994 and 1999 because the primary strategic objective of Ukraine's "multi-vector" foreign policy has been to keep Kuchma and his small clique in power. To keep Kuchma in power has meant that Ukraine's foreign policy swings according to his personal predicament.

During his first term in office, Kuchma felt threatened domestically by the Communist Party and externally by Russia. He therefore aligned with NATO and the United States. During his second term, Kuchma became internationally isolated during the "Kuchmagate" scandal and then over his authorization of the sale of Kolchuga radars to Iraq. The United States became the main threat to Kuchma and he shifted his allegiance towards Russia.

In an attempt to improve relations with the United States, however, Kuchma backed the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, where Ukraine now has the largest non-NATO member military force. This was a true example of Ukraine's "multi-vector"

foreign policy in action. First Ukraine sent military equipment to Saddam Hussein and then it joined in the U.S.-led occupation force that toppled him.

Russia may still be tempted to put its backing behind Yanukovich. After all, he is from the pro-Russian Donbas. But, if it does, Russians would be again deluding themselves. Yanukovich would continue Kuchma's high level deception vis-à-vis both Russia and the West. Yanukovich's foreign policy would be neither pro-Russian nor pro-Western but simply pro-Yanukovich.

One of the biggest myths in Russia surrounds the need to support any presidential candidate in Ukraine who opposes the "anti-Russian nationalist." Such a label was attached to Kravchuk in 1994 and has been pinned on Yushchenko this year.

The degree to which these labels are meaningless can be seen in Kravchuk's evolution. Kravchuk, the alleged former "nationalist," is today a leading figure and the head of the parliamentary faction of Viktor Medvedchuk's Social Democratic United Party. Medvedchuk has good contacts in President Vladimir Putin's administration and often touts his party as the most "pro-Russian" party in Ukraine.

Kravchuk never experienced any road to Damascus-style conversion. In the course of his political life, he evolved from Communist Party ideologist to a "nationalist" aligned with the center-right Rukh, then he became a member of the Liberal Party and now is in Medvedchuk's party. The thread linking all of this is a lack of conviction in anything except power and money.

Yanukovich's lack of any personal convictions are even more pronounced. The Party of Regions that he leads is the most ideologically amorphous among pro-Kuchma amorphous center parties.

The only factor that unites Kravchuk, Kuchma, Medvedchuk, Yanukovich and his allies is state nationalism. This nationalism refuses to share power with its domestic opponents or with foreign governments, whether Russian or American.

This nationalism is evident in the manner in which Russia and the West were sidelined in the privatization of Kryvorizhstal in June. No foreign bids ever had a chance of being successful as the purpose was to both privatize the plant to Ukrainian oligarchs and to reward Kuchma's allies -- one of whom happened to be his son-in-law, Viktor Pinchuk. Pinchuk's business partner is Renat Akhmetov, the main oligarch behind Yanukovich's Donbas clan.

Another example of such anti-Russian business activities is the planned re-nationalization of Ukraine's largest mobile phone operator, UMC. UMC is owned by the Russian company MIS.

The main lobbyist for the re-nationalization of UMC is Sergei Lyovochkin, a presidential adviser who is a member of Yanukovich's Donbas clan. The Yanukovich government is again showing its opposition to allowing foreign (whether Russian or Western) business interests to participate in Ukraine's economy.

Russian readers might be surprised to read that the decision to privatize UMC was actually made during Yushchenko's tenure as prime minister (which was also when the government first started paying Ukraine's energy debts).

Ukraine's October elections are likely to run to a second round in November when Yushchenko will most likely face Yanukovich. If Russia decides to back Yanukovich it should do so knowing that he would continue Kuchma's deception with Russia and the West. If it decides to throw its support behind Yushchenko, it will have chosen a different type of politician, not cut from the same cloth as Kravchuk, Kuchma and Yanukovich.

In an open letter in Nezavisimaya Gazeta this month, Yushchenko wrote that it is time Ukrainian-Russian relations progressed to a new level, characterized by "extreme honesty and openness."

Russia should, thus, conclude that its national interests are best served by a Yushchenko victory.

Taras Kuzio, a visiting professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, contributed this comment to The Moscow Times.