

Opinion

Yatsenyuk, a Yushchenko clone, will bring stagnation

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Taras Kuzio argues that Arseniy Yatsenyuk won't bring radical change that Ukraine needs.

It would not be the first time when Ukrainian politicians have overly ambitious views of their futures after serving as parliamentary speaker. Ivan Pliushch, Oleksandr Moroz, Oleksandr Tkachenko and Volodymyr Lytvyn all have harbored presidential ambitions during different stages of Ukraine's independence. But none has succeeded in coming close to winning the coveted presidency. Being speaker of the Verkhovna Rada is not a good position from which to launch a presidential bid.

What happens if you launch a presidential bid after you have been ousted as speaker? Arseniy Yatsenyuk was removed as parliamentary speaker last November, a vote made possible by 10 votes provided by presidential secretariat head Victor Baloha's United Center Party. Nobody doubts that Baloha acted on President Victor Yushchenko's instructions, even though the president, on a visit to Poland at the time, feigned surprise.

Yatsenyuk's popularity has soared in recent months. He is now three times more popular than Yushchenko. Of the top six presidential candidates, Yatsenyuk comes in third, while Yushchenko is at the bottom. Much of Yatsenyuk's recent popularity is due to public protest against the squabbling of senior leaders. Consequently, all three (Yushchenko, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and ex-Prime Minister Victor Yanukovich) have lost support.

It is highly doubtful that current protest feelings found in opinion polls will translate into votes during an election. Voters make strategic choices based on whether their vote will be wasted. That's why fewer vote for the Liberals in British elections. In Ukraine, this factor is enhanced by negative voting as Orange Revolution backers will choose whoever (Tymoshenko, Yatsenyuk?) is best placed to (again) defeat Yanukovich. A large proportion of voting in 2004 was negative voting on both sides.

Yatsenyuk's case has two additional factors that could work against him: age and religion. He only turns 35 in May, a few months before candidates are registered by

the Central Election Commission for the presidential elections, and 35 is the minimum age to be president in Ukraine. Yatsenyuk's youth will attract young voters, his perceived inexperience will deter middle and older generation voters.

A second factor – bigotry – should not play a role in any democracy. Unfortunately it does. We will never know how many Americans did not vote for Barack Obama because he was black. But the figure must have been high among uneducated, rural, white and small-town America.

Yatsenyuk has Jewish origins and, although Ukraine has not witnessed the levels of anti-Semitism found in Russia, it does exist. The extreme right (such as Oleh Tyahnybok's Freedom Party) is growing in support during the global crisis. Elections to the Ternopil Oblast council have been stopped because Tyahnybok is running a close second to Tymoshenko's bloc.

Western Ukrainian members of Our Ukraine, such as Yaroslav Kendzor, who is also head of Lviv's Rukh movement, have spread anti-Semitic remarks about Tymoshenko such as "the Jew with the Braid (zhydivka z kosoyu)." Indeed, the whispering campaign against Tymoshenko as being unfit to be in a leadership position because she is "not ethnic Ukrainian" – a slander spread from Yushchenko's secretariat – has reached a crescendo and is a slur on the once-Orange president's legacy.

Tymoshenko does not have Jewish origins. Hers are Armenian and Ukrainian. Nevertheless, the campaign against her gives one the ability to imagine how Yatsenyuk's bonafide Jewish origins could become the brunt of anti-Semitic remarks in a presidential campaign.

The best position for success in winning the presidency is that of opposition leader, as Leonid Kuchma and Yushchenko did in 1994 and 2004, respectively, not that of parliamentary speaker. The one exception to this rule was in 1999, when opposition Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko was defeated by President Kuchma. But this was a special case, analogous to Russia in 1996, when the incumbent won a victory through negative voting: Voters did not vote for Kuchma or Russian President Boris Yeltsin, but against their Communist opponents.

Yatsenyuk is handicapped by an inability to become an effective leader in opposition or in government because his socialization is like that of Yushchenko. Like Yushchenko, Yatsenyuk's pragmatic, economic background makes him uncomfortable in opposition. Yatsenyuk, for example, has never criticized Yushchenko, even after the president betrayed him last November by giving chief of staff Baloha the order to vote to remove him as parliamentary speaker.

Yatsenyuk, similar to Yushchenko, is the perennial "constructive oppositionist." Since Yushchenko was removed in April 2001 as prime minister, he never once criticized Kuchma. This makes Yatsenyuk very different from another rising young generation politician, Anatoliy Hrytsenko, who has been willing to criticize the president. Hrytsenko survived three governments as defense minister (including Yanukovych's). But he was replaced after he ran afoul of Baloha, who wanted access to Ministry of Defense property.

With Yatsenyuk's popularity more than twice that of Yushchenko, Yushchenko could decide not to run (as many are advising him). He could groom Yatsenyuk as Yushchenko's "candidate" in the presidential elections. Yatsenyuk's (and Yushchenko's, if he stood) main opponent would be Tymoshenko.

But do Ukrainians really want another five years of a "Yushchenko clone," an imitation of reform and further stagnation? This would be my major concern in a Yatsenyuk presidency. Namely, I fear that he would not implement the radical (Orange Revolution) policies that Ukraine desperately needs.

One major indicator of Yatsenyuk's allies can be seen in his sources of financing. As the Kyiv Post wrote on Feb. 19, oligarchs Victor Pinchuk and Serhiy Taruta have openly provided funding.

Pinchuk funded a similar "new generation" group of young politicians in the 2002 elections – the Winter Crop Generation that was meant to woo votes away from Yushchenko's Our Ukraine. Winter Crop was led by Inna Bogoslovskaya and Valery Khoroshkovsky, neither of whom has made good names for themselves ever since.

Bogoslovskaya has earned herself a reputation as a deranged and hysterical anti-Tymoshenko baba in the Party of Regions, while Khoroshkovsky has worked with

RosUkrEnergo co-owner Dmytro Firtash in the rabidly anti-Tymoshenko Inter TV channel.

The Tymoshenko bloc accused Yatsenyuk of being funded by Firtash. There were rumors that he was offered a position at Nadra Bank that was purchased by Firtash in October. Yatsenyuk's denial that he received Firtash funding would appear to be disingenuous. A source in a presidential think tank told me recently: "As for Yatsenyuk, he's 90 percent made by Firtash money: Some friends of mine work for him and confirm that."

Yatsenyuk would join similar former parliamentary speakers with pragmatic backgrounds, such as Plyushch and Lytvyn who have had little political success in their post-speaker political careers or in building up ideologically-driven political parties.

Yatsenyuk's embryo political project, the Front for Change, is ideologically amorphous, claiming that it "will be a team of professional, expert people from different generations." Have we not heard this before?

In an Oct. 20 interview in *Ekonomicheskie Izvestiya*, Yatsenyuk described the party's ideology as encompassing vague formulations, such as in support for democracy, preventing the monopolization of power, equal rights for economic actors and backing of diverse political influences. In another interview, he described his party's ideology as that of "state-regulated form of liberalism," according to UNIAN news agency on Dec. 2.

The ideological vagueness of these ideas gives little grounds for optimism for Yatsenyuk's political project. Ukraine has countless such political projects and few have had much success.

Ukraine's young democracy needs not another political party based on the inflated ego of yet another Ukrainian Hetman, but a consolidation of center and center-right reformist forces. The creation of Yatsenyuk's political force will merely add to the deep splintering of Ukraine's center-right.

With only 72 deputies, the Our Ukraine-People's Self Defense faction already has three sub-factions: a pro-Tymoshenko wing that has joined the Orange coalition, Vyacheslav Kyrylenko's For Ukraine 17 deputies (including Yatsenyuk) who have not joined the coalition, but who do not want anything to do with Baloha and the pro-Baloha United Center's 10 deputies.

The president has lost control over Our Ukraine and has only 27 supporters left in parliament. But these two groups – For Ukraine and United Center – hate each other.

Ukraine certainly craves a new generation of political leaders. The question is whether Yatsenyuk resembles something new. This is doubtful.

Yatsenyuk's project is built on ego and personality politics, with little ideological content, and therefore unlikely to represent a significant break with the false dawn of the Yushchenko era. Yatsenyuk would be a replica of Yushchenko, a "pragmatic, constructive oppositionist" imitation of reform.

If you want another five years of Yushchenko, then vote for Yatsenyuk.

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