

An appeal to the Orange Revolution's paymaster

Ukraine's president writes in the Washington Post

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Viktor Yushchenko, the pro-Western president of Ukraine, wrote an opinion column in the *Washington Post* on November 29 marking the second anniversary of the so-called Orange Revolution, the American-orchestrated coup that brought him into power.

Titled "Building a Democracy: The Orange Revolution lives on in Ukraine," the piece appears at a point of deep crisis for the Yushchenko administration.

Less than two years after assuming office, Yushchenko is widely hated for presiding over a corrupt administration that has implemented "free market" policies, compounded by rising food and fuel prices that are making life ever harder for Ukrainians. Meanwhile, a tiny group of oligarchs continues to enrich themselves.

In Independence Square, which in 2004 was the focal point of the mass demonstrations that Yushchenko utilised to gain the presidency, almost no evidence of the Orange Revolution was to be found during the anniversary apart from some "Orange" merchandise on sale to tourists. Festivities in the square were cancelled and pictures of Yushchenko taken down due to opposition from rival factions of the former Orange movement and the lack of popular support for the president.

Stymied by the parliamentary success of his rivals and unable to push through his unpopular commitment to join NATO, the Ukrainian president is clearly concerned for his political survival and hopes to maintain support for his weakened and discredited presidency among his principal backers in the Washington establishment.

The article was made more timely by the fact that Viktor Yanukovich, Yushchenko's rival for the presidency in 2004 and the current prime minister of Ukraine, started a four-day visit to Washington on Sunday. The visit, during which Yanukovich meets with leading administration personnel including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney, is intended to win US support for the prime minister and his Party of the Regions, which is

seen in Washington as being too close to Russia.

Yushchenko's commentary opens with a condemnation of the government in Kiev prior to the Orange Revolution, headed by President Leonid Kuchma and his prime minister, Yanukovich. The article categorises his opponents in 2004 as "an authoritarian regime" that "hid behind law enforcement agencies in an attempt to prolong their corrupt hold on power."

The implication is clearly that Yanukovich, a Kuchma loyalist, was part of the *ancien regime* and therefore is not to be trusted. Naturally, Yushchenko neglects to mention that he himself was a member of that regime, first overseeing the sell-off of former state-owned enterprises in the 1990s while head of the central bank before serving as Kuchma's prime minister from 1999 until falling out of favour in 2001.

Yushchenko has been forced to share power with the Party of the Regions since August 2006, when Yanukovich regained the powerful role of prime minister following elections to the Rada (parliament) in which the president's Our Ukraine party was beaten into a humiliating third place. Since then, divisions over foreign policy and patronage have created a political impasse, with Yushchenko at constant loggerheads with both Yanukovich and his erstwhile Orange ally, Yulia Tymoshenko, now leader of the parliamentary opposition.

Relations between the president and the government broke down further on December 1 when the Rada voted to dismiss the pro-Western Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk, an appointee and key ally of Yushchenko. Another presidential appointee, Interior Minister Yuriy Lutsenko, was also ousted.

Despite his policy of maintaining a strong relationship with Moscow and balking at NATO membership, Yanukovich is being considered by some in US policy circles—including the editors of the *Post*, who were among the first to counsel an alliance between Yushchenko and Yanukovich following the Rada election—as a potential ally.

The Party of the Regions is the political vehicle for oligarchic families from eastern Ukraine, whose economic interests in heavy industry and petrochemicals are closely tied to the Russian economy and the supply of cheap Russian oil and gas. While these forces need to preserve a working relationship with Moscow, they are also rivals of the Russian elite and would welcome an alliance with US imperialism as a means of pressuring Moscow and advancing their interests on the world markets.

In a clear attack on Tymoshenko, the co-leader of the Orange Revolution, the *Post* column states, “Some ‘orange’ politicians have ignored their fundamental duty to deliver results for the public good. Instead, gaining political power and seeking the limelight have become their goal.”

Here, the Ukrainian president is making a direct appeal to Washington not to risk supporting Tymoshenko, a demagogue who, while prime minister from 2004 until 2005, promised certain populist measures in a bid to build support for her own presidential ambitions. By accusing her of ignoring the “public good,” Yushchenko is accusing his rival of being incapable of implementing the “free market” policies demanded by Washington and the transnational corporations.

However, many in US foreign policy circles favour abandoning Yushchenko, already a lame duck, in favour of Tymoshenko—who has largely built her political career since 2001 on Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Russian chauvinism. She is viewed as a potential vehicle to pursue Washington’s ambitions to aggressively roll back Russian influence in the former USSR.

Further appealing to his American sponsors, Yushchenko apologetically states that, “we failed to communicate effectively with our international partners”—i.e., his presidency, locked in factional fighting within the Orange camp and against the Party of the Regions, has been unable to significantly advance the dictates of the foreign backers who brought him to power.

To overcome this, Yushchenko outlines measures “to continue constitutional reforms that facilitate the effective work of government and prevent a return to authoritarianism or the usurpation of power”.

The article goes on, “We will continue refining a reliable system of checks and balances between the presidency, parliament and coalition government to expedite policy decision making. To meet these objectives, I have commissioned a group of constitutional experts to recommend amendments to strengthen our nascent democratic institutions.”

In the context of the deep unpopularity of Yushchenko and Our Ukraine, and the bitter factional divisions within the Ukrainian oligarchy, such “constitutional reforms” and

“amendments” are very likely to take the form of a strengthening of the presidency at the expense of its rivals.

In particular, any further constitutional changes are likely to be used to drive forward the pro-US foreign policy agenda of Yushchenko, whose powers as president already give him a large degree of control over foreign and defence matters. Yushchenko has committed Ukraine to pursuing membership in both the European Union (EU) and NATO. The Party of the Regions-led coalition government, while seeking rapprochement with Washington and the EU, is currently opposed to Ukrainian membership in NATO and seeks to retain close ties with Russia.

Unless he proves himself able to advance NATO membership and to move Ukraine further out from the Russian sphere of influence, Yushchenko cannot expect any further support from Washington. He writes, “The president, coalition government and parliament determine the speed with which these goals are reached.

“Most important, the democratic debates in Kiev’s halls of power are now centered on ideas about competing economic theories, values and worldviews. Our current system of checks and balances requires policy coordination, party coexistence and political compromise for us to move forward. Not everyone likes the new rules of the game, and some are having trouble playing in this new reality—but Ukraine’s democracy is here to stay.”

In reality, the Ukrainian political system is dominated by parties that act as fronts for clans of oligarchs. The limited constitutional reforms that took place after 2004 were solely to facilitate the coming to power of elements within the elite who had previously been excluded by Kuchma’s domination of political life.

Genuine democracy is incompatible with the massive level of social inequality that exists in Ukraine, and the formal democratic structures of which Yushchenko writes will not stand as a barrier to the pursuit of the Ukrainian oligarchs’ goals or the geopolitical interests of Washington, Moscow and the western European powers.

In this process, President Yushchenko, despite his entreaties, may find himself just the latest discarded US “asset” in Washington’s drive for global dominance.



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