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Wind Dances

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# WILD DANCES

**It has all the hallmarks of popular fiction; a president caught up in persistent allegations of scandal, while his potential successors battle it out by fair means or foul and political 'technologists' try to engineer victory. A good read perhaps were it not that the country concerned – Ukraine – needs to work out where it stands in the world.**

UKRAINE HAS JUST CELEBRATED THIRTEEN YEARS OF independence, ten years of President Leonid Kuchma and victory at the Eurovision Song Contest for Ruslana's song Wild Dances. The capital Kiev was also buzzing with rumours that Kuchma would resign before the election due on October 31, copying the former Russian president Boris Yeltsin's approach – a discredited president granting his prime minister a few months as his chosen successor and sufficient publicity for a probable free-ride to victory.

Kuchma, however, is more discredited than Yeltsin ever was. First came the Gongadze scandal in September 2000, the gruesome death of an opposition journalist. Then the Melnychenko tapes secretly recorded in the president's office, apparently proving his complicity in the Gongadze murder – but this was only the tip of a very large iceberg.

Chief among Kuchma's other misdeeds was the Kolchuha

scandal – the secret sale of a powerful radar system which, on the eve of the Iraq war, the United States viewed as proof of his involvement in the illegal supply of weapons to Saddam Hussein's military.

Kuchma has toughed out all these scandals, despite effectively becoming persona non grata in the west. Indeed, although he had served two terms since his original election in 1994, he initially seemed determined to twist the constitution and carry on.

However, the deadline for registration came and went in August, and Kuchma's name was not amongst the 26 candidates – three of whom have since been weeded out. Without any formal guarantee of future immunity, he also balked at the opposite

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option, early resignation. Another rumour, that he might cancel the elections so that all registrations would be annulled and he might run again, proved unfounded.

The front runners to succeed Kuchma are now former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko, who, as head of Ukraine's only real reform government between 1999 and 2001, cleaned up corruption and kick-started economic growth. Polls show him with around thirty percent of support. Close behind on 25 percent is the current Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, whose own criminal record for theft and assault matches the muscular reputation of the Donetsk 'clan' he represents in Ukraine's far east.

Is it just a simple case of good guy versus bad, the hope of renewal against the threat of yet more scandal? Will the good guy win, and what are the prospects for cleaning up the country's reputation? And will that help any rapprochement with the US and Europe, after Ukraine was pointedly excluded both from European Union and NATO expansions, and from the list of possible future invitees?

## REAL OPPOSITION

Unlike Russia, there is a real and powerful opposition in Ukraine; but it is still smarting from Yushchenko's removal as Prime Minister in April 2001, from its naïve assumption that Kuchma could simply be shamed into resigning over the Gongadze affair, and from the effective reversal of the voters' verdict at the parliamentary elections in March 2002. Those results are worth revisiting.

Yushchenko put together the Our Ukraine block, which came first with 23.6 percent of the vote – his former Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, architect of many of his economic reforms, created her own block which won 7.3 percent – while the opposition Socialist party took 6.9 percent and the quasi-opposition Communist party twenty percent. The government coalition For A United Ukraine won only 11.8 percent; its partner the Social Democratic Party (united), known as the SDPU(o) – in reality the Kiev business clan – a similarly disappointing 6.9 percent.

The opposition was therefore understandably aggrieved that the authorities took control of parliament, thanks to the other half of the election in the territorial constituencies, where they stuffed the ballot, bought themselves victory or strong-armed independents to join their ranks.

As this still didn't quite add up, more bribes and threats have induced 28 opposition deputies to defect since 2002.

The opposition is therefore still schizophrenic; in public confident of another victory, in private worried that it will be stolen from them again. The authorities, on the other hand, are aware that any free vote remotely reminiscent of the last one will turf them out of office.

And the Gongadze affair still rumbles on. No one has been charged, despite a succession of implausible official statements that his killers were common criminals – the first set of such suspects having also been conveniently murdered by other common criminals.

In June The Independent published a story naming Gongadze's real killers, an interior ministry 'team' in cahoots with local gangsters, and detailing a cover-up that included the murder by lethal injection of a key witness, on the eve of his testimony.

Criminal charges against a range of powerful individuals, even the president, would be demanded by the opposition rank and file should Yushchenko win – although other rumours suggest that a deal may already have been done.

The authorities, of course, have a different story. Their public relations machine regularly complains that Yushchenko can claim no monopoly on democratic credentials. It also says that the real success story, the acceleration of gross domestic product

growth since 2000 to 9.4 percent last year and 12.7 percent in the first half of this – making Ukraine the fastest growing economy in Europe – has been ignored. It depicts the 'revolutionary' opposition as the main threat to this record and, brazenly, to Ukraine's European choice – the European Union's accession criteria agreed in Copenhagen being after all both political and economic.

## DENIABLE FRAUD

So who is right? The authorities' intention this time is to manipulate the election so that victory is possible with a more easily deniable level of fraud – say under ten percent of the vote – rather than steal the election outright. They are therefore prepared to clean up their act to an extent, but far from completely, as the local oligarchs are still powerful and there is still plenty of money to be made – the steel company Kryvorizhstal was sold this June to two of their number for \$800 million, although foreign offers went as high as \$1.5 billion.

The authorities have therefore privatised their stop Yushchenko campaign to expensive, and secretive, teams of Russian 'political technologists'. How can they hope to reverse the 2002 result by means other than obvious fraud? Divide and rule and rearrange the political cast list are the two most obvious ploys.

Having failed to imprison Tymoshenko with a classic scandal, a secret video supposedly showing her attempting to bribe a judge, the Russian 'technologists' have had more success trying to ensnare the Socialists. They have put pressure on the party's business interests, while offering it media exposure on channels controlled by the SDPU(o), to entice them to break ranks.

The Socialists, however, worry about the damage an open deal with the not particularly social democratic Social Democrats would do to their prospects at the next parliamentary elections in 2006.

The 'technologists' are more confident that the Communists will cooperate, they have private business links to the oligarchs, especially to Yanukovich's clan. However, if their leader Petro Symonenko polls well it may be at the expense of Yanukovich in south-east Ukraine.

The media controlled by the SDPU(o) is also responsible for building up the idea of a 'nationalist threat' linked to Yushchenko – extremists were supposedly responsible for two bombs in a Kiev market on August 20. No fewer than four far right candidates are in the race. All have covert links to either the Yanukovich clan or the SDPU(o).

A further twist might be dubbed 'competitive victimhood'. Yushchenko was forced to take two weeks off the campaign trail and attend a clinic in Vienna after an alleged poisoning. It was claimed that he fell ill after a secret 'clear the air' meeting with the heads of Ukraine's security services on September 5.

Yanukovich meanwhile was hospitalised after being hit with 'several objects' at a rally in west Ukraine on September 24. Official media immediately blamed Yushchenko's extremist 'supporters'. A video shown on the one independent television channel, on the other hand, showed Yanukovich – a big man – collapsing theatrically after apparently being hit with a single raw egg.

The political technologists, however, have not succeeded in one key task they set themselves after 2002. That election was seen as too polarised, a referendum for or against the scandal-tainted president versus his economically successful former prime minister, ensuring that their attempts to set up rival third forces failed. This time, there is again no viable third force, and the anointing of Yanukovich as the common candidate of the powers-that-be may create too obvious a target for voter discontent.

Yushchenko seems a likely winner in the first round, but other candidates' supporters, and as yet uncommitted voters in the

south-east and east-centre, are likely to be decisive in the second; as will the amount of fraud the authorities are prepared to risk if their other methods fail. The opposition must stand firm, and hope that elements in the current regime will defect, despite their unity behind the president over the last four years.

Several of the so-called oligarchs are seeking to legitimise their business empires, and all distrust the SDPU(o). Yushchenko has been trying to broker a deal with one or more of them for two years – forgiveness for their past sins in return for co-operation with a real campaign against future corruption. Such an arrangement would allow renewed reform. The authorities' various factions have certainly begun to look nervous as the election approaches; with the parliamentary 'majority' apparently collapsing and then reforming, Defence Minister Yevhen Marchuk's abrupt dismissal, and a frustrated Kuchma lashing out at the 'ineffective' Yanukovych.

## BUSINESS AS USUAL

The west would be rightly dismayed at a Yanukovych victory, and the status quo he represents. He will not win clean – Yushchenko has already complained of secret service surveillance and the leeching of the state budget to fund election bribes. The likely expansion of the Donetsk 'clan' after such a victory would destabilise the current fragile truce between oligarchs.

Ukraine's admittedly impressive economic growth, the fruit of the reforms put in place between 1999 and 2001, is sure to slow dramatically if the political sphere is not cleaned up and if resurgent rent-seeking by the oligarchs is not stamped out.

A further expansion of Russian influence would surely follow a Yanukovych victory – Russian business penetration has already increased hugely in the years of Ukraine's semi-isolation.

Although some in Moscow worry about his innate threat to the unity of the current elite, they feel that, if he became president Yanukovych would breath real life into the single economic space that was agreed last year. So far this exists only on paper.

Significantly, Yushchenko has tried to win support in Moscow by soft-peddalling his opposition to such trade arrangements. As prime minister, he opened many doors for Russian business and his Our Ukraine block still has a strong Russian business lobby.

It is his pro-western foreign policy that Moscow has always disliked, especially as the choice for foreign minister would likely be their long-term bête-noir Borys Tarasiuk, whom Russian pressure forced out of office in October 2000.

## EUROPEAN VALUES

Yushchenko and Tarasiuk's first priority would be an upgrade in relations with the European Union (EU), with associate membership the immediate target. Would the west respond with sufficient enthusiasm to allow the shift? Ukraine is not Russia, and there is real chance of a breakthrough for European values, if it did respond.

The EU, however, seems preoccupied with digesting the May expansion of ten new members. Paradoxically, confirmation of the start of accession talks with Turkey would be good news for Ukraine. If Turkey, then why not Ukraine? Washington, on the other hand, seems unlikely to jog Brussels' arm. With 1,650 troops in the Iraq 'stabilisation' force, Ukraine has probably contributed all it can to the 'war' on terror – though this is still the fourth largest contingent.

The west will have to recognise Kiev's intrinsic importance instead. The stakes are high, not just for Ukraine, but for the economic and political prospects in the European Union's 'near abroad' as a whole.



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