

The 2004 Ukrainian Orange Revolution

Article by Andrew Sheppard

Tradition has it that the Belgian Revolution of 1830 began in the Brussels opera house. If future popular historians want to identify a memorable starting point for the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, they could do worse than fix on the September gala performance of Taras Bulba that marked the opening of the new season of opera in Kiev.

Following a lusty performance of Gogol's tale of Zaporizhzhian Cossacks giving 17th century Polish occupying forces a bloody nose, bouquets were presented as the performers bowed and the audience enthusiastically applauded. A young woman staggered on with a bouquet in a basket so large it had to be placed on the stage, rather than in the hands of a soloist. A voice announced that the bouquet was from the Prime Minister, Viktor Fedorovich Yanukovich. The applause abruptly stopped, there was some booing, the performers looked awkward and avoided the offending bouquet.

The booing was particularly interesting in that there is no tradition of booing in Ukraine; the practice is a recent import from the West.

Besides being Prime Minister – parachuted in by the outgoing President Kuchma in a manner reminiscent of Yeltsin and Putin – Yanukovich was a candidate for the Presidential Election of 31st October, one of a total of 24, of which (barring accident or assassination) only two had a realistic chance of election, himself and Viktor Andreyevich Yushchenko. Yushchenko, a popular former Governor of the National Bank of Ukraine and Prime Minister, latterly out of favour with Kuchma, was leader of the Our Ukraine bloc in parliament.

By mid-September, Kiev and other principal cities of Ukraine were saturated with Yanukovich posters, bearing declarations by representative doctors, nurses, teachers and others that they were за Януковича. Most TV stations carried much coverage of Yanukovich's Prime Ministerial progress around the country, as did most of the principal newspapers. Announcements were made of increases to pensions and the salaries of doctors and teachers. The Governor of the National Bank, who was also Yanukovich's campaign manager, imposed himself on university audiences for a lecture purportedly on economics that incorporated a clear indication of how students (and their teachers) should vote.

At that stage of the campaign, there was little or no rejoinder from Yushchenko or any of the other candidates. There were signs, however, of a Yanukovich backlash (by any standards his campaign had surely peaked too early). In particular, a bit of prison slang was being savoured by many tongues not old enough to know of its origin in the Gulag Archipelago. Nowadays, зек simply refers to a common criminal, the equivalent of the English "con" or convict. Yanukovich, it was widely asserted, had two convictions in his past, one for robbery, another for rape. "We do not want a criminal for President," a student plainly told me.

Visiting Chernihiv one day, I noted the city was subject to the same saturation Yanukovich coverage as elsewhere. But something new: the Lenin memorial bore a wonderfully original piece of graffiti, Ленин за Януковича. What appeared to be the same hand had also scrawled зек over a Yanukovich poster in a shop window.

That was the first sighting of the word зек, but it soon began to appear in Kiev too, including on what may be the lowest budget election handout ever. Found in apartment block letter boxes

was a three inch by one inch scrap of paper bearing an image of a leering pumpkin (for the Halloween election) and the legend “Голосуймо за Януковича! Голосуймо за зека!” (Vote for Yanukovich, vote for the convict). The message was cheaply printed on paper already used on the other side and cut out with scissors.

Despite an almost total lack of positive coverage by the Ukrainian mass media, Yushchenko went into the first round election ahead in the opinion polls and had marginally more votes recorded against his name than any other candidate (Yushchenko 39.9%, Yanukovich 39.3%). However, since no candidate polled more than 50% of the vote, a second round was necessary. That was set for 21st November.

With the field now reduced to two candidates, Yushchenko was harder to ignore, but was still accorded predominantly negative attention by the mass media, and less in total than Yanukovich, who continued to use the office of Prime Minister as a campaign platform. Yushchenko had meanwhile been poisoned in an apparent attempt to kill him and was ill, spending time out of the country in an Austrian clinic. Nevertheless, his campaign advanced and the colour orange emerged as an unmissable “Small pieces of orange tape began to appear on trees, lamp posts, bus shelters, gradually migrating to the button holes and handbags of the more politically bold.” feature. Again low budget; small pieces of orange tape began to appear on trees, lamp posts, bus shelters – gradually migrating to the button holes and handbags of the more politically bold. A highly successful march was organised through Kiev and the campaign slogan Так, Ukrainian for Yes, appeared on hundreds of orange flags.

The outcome and aftermath of the second-round election on 21st November is now well-known throughout the world. Opinion polls and exit polls were confounded by the apparent result: victory for Yanukovich by 49 to 47%. Even before reports came in of skulduggery at Polling Stations, Territorial Election Commissions and the Central Election Commission, voters in most regions other than the south-east concluded that since they had not voted for Yanukovich and they hardly knew of anyone who had, the result must be untrue.

Yushchenko had called his supporters to victory rallies in Kiev’s Independence Square and similar locations in other cities. When it became clear that the result had been stolen, he asked those in Kiev to remain until victory was achieved. Temperatures plunged to -10°C and there was heavy snowfall, but they stayed. A tent city formed, blocking Khreshchatik, the best known road in Ukraine, a broad shopping street leading to Independence Square. Government offices were picketed.

Neither Ukraine nor Kiev were on strike, but many employers were content to see workers take time off to join the demonstration. A declaration of support for Yushchenko by the Mayor of Kiev was quickly followed by his counterpart in Lviv, and then others. Some who were slow to declare for Yushchenko were subjected to demonstrations outside their Town Halls. In Bila Tserkva it took demonstrators three days to secure the declaration they wanted. Then the demonstrators, many of them students, turned their attention to the Rector of the town’s university. He was in France and had to be hastily contacted for an affirmation that he too would from henceforth back Yushchenko. In Kiev, several notable public buildings were closed for normal use and members of their staff served hot drinks to cold and exhausted demonstrators, allowing them to sleep on floors. Those buildings included the National Art Museum and the former Музей Ленина, now reincarnated as Украинский Дом and used for trade fairs and exhibitions.

Much heralded counter-demonstrations by Yanukovich supporters brought to Kiev by train

never materialised, though there is a story that some would-be demonstrators got as close as sidings on the outskirts of the city and remained there in subzero temperatures for a couple of days without food or water. Fortunately, local people concluded that they were there purely because they had been either “made or paid” and saw no political impediment to extending the usual generous Ukrainian hospitality.

At the crucial point when Yanukovich demanded forcible clearance of the Kiev demonstrators and Kuchma hesitated (for all his faults, which will surely be brought to our attention in the months and years to come, Kuchma undoubtedly averted many broken heads), the support of the city council was critical for the demonstrators. Kiev was effectively united against the Dnipropetrovsk mafia that had governed Ukraine for most of the years since independence. Those who deplored what some described as a putsch mostly found the discretion to keep silent. Many, especially politicians, administrators and businessmen who had supported Yanukovich on the presumption that he would win, now changed sides. The world watched and, but for Russia, Belarus and Moldova, generally supported.

Yushchenko and his supporters had won the moral victory, but the situation on the ground was essentially deadlocked. Various suggestions of new elections with new candidates were made while the international community attempted to broker consensus. On 3rd December, the Ukraine Supreme Court came to the rescue in rejecting the 21st November election as too seriously marred by falsification of results to be a meaningful indicator of the will of the people. It prescribed a 6th December re-run of the second round.

Before the necessary moves were made there was some horsetrading in parliament over constitutional amendments reducing the power of the President. Yushchenko agreed to place the weight of his voting bloc behind the changes as a quid pro quo for adjustments to the Election Law.

Parliament replaced the chairman and three members of the Central Election Commission nominated by Mr Yanukovich’s party. Polling Station and Territorial Election Commissions were reduced in size and now had equal numbers of members nominated by each of the two candidates. Those nominated by the 22 candidates excluded from the race were no longer admitted. Whether a Yanukovich or a Yushchenko nominee provided the chairmanship of those bodies was decided simply by whether it bore an odd or even number. Where the chair was provided by one party, the secretary was provided by the other. The use of Absentee Voter Certificates was greatly restricted, the discredited 21st November voter lists were dropped in favour of those of 31st October – subject to new amendment and updating – and access to a mobile vote (intended for those physically unable to visit a Polling Station) was sharply curtailed.

By this stage, the use of government темники (from тема: topic or theme), directing what could and could not be said about the candidates on television and in newspapers, had been exposed and discontinued. Television coverage of the Yushchenko campaign mushroomed. Many of the poster boards around the country that had previously carried Yanukovich posters now carried Yushchenko posters. Yanukovich finally took a break from the office of Prime Minister, campaigning primarily in the east and the south, where he had greatest support. The Yushchenko campaign formed a “freedom train” of motor vehicles driving from city to city, also predominantly in the south and east. For the most part it was allowed to pass unobstructed.

A high point of the campaign was a televised debate between the two candidates, six days before the election. Each confronted the other with direct questions. To the neutral observer, Yanukovich’s performance appeared uncomfortable, but it played well with those who were

inclined to support him anyway. It was delivered primarily in Russian and he asserted strongly his dedication to family and religious values. Whilst emphasising his long-standing love and respect for his wife, he apologised for the offence she had caused by referring to many Ukrainians as “goats”, in fact the least of several absurdities in her public utterances that had made her a laughing-stock among the Ukrainian intelligentsia. Her suggestions that the Orange Revolutionaries had made themselves high on drug-laced oranges and that America was flooding the country with US made валенки (felt boots) were greeted with hoots of derision that will not completely die away for a long time. Unlike an earlier television debate, the broadcast was not followed by a biased round-table discussion.

Four days before polling day, the Yushchenko campaign staged a televised concert and rally from “the historic stage of the Orange Revolution” in Maidan Nezalezhnosti. Besides Yushchenko and prominent politicians supporting him, those assembled on stage included Ruslana Lyzhychko, winner for Ukraine of the 2004 Eurovision Song Contest, World Heavyweight Boxing Champion Vitaly Klichko, and other substantial national celebrities of what is seen as having been an excellent year for Ukraine’s world image.

For the election, I travelled to Lviv, 40 miles from the border with Poland. Because of its geographical position, epitomising Ukraine (the borderland) itself, Lviv has accumulated a lot of history, much of it bloody, but the city is today safe and pleasant. Throughout the election and pre-election period,

Lviv provided a bastion of support for Victor Yushchenko. In Lviv, as in Kiev, orange was the height of fashion. Clothing, scarves, accessories, little streamers of orange tape attached to almost everything to which they could be attached, and the fashionable hair colour for ladies was orange. Street traders offered Father Christmas hats for 15 Hryvna, otherwise identical hats in orange for 18 Hryvna.

On the day before the election, with a Danish partner, I visited ten Polling Stations in an area centred on Mikolaiv, 25 miles south of Lviv. Both urban and rural, the Polling Stations were invariably manned, Polling Commission members and the police keeping watch over the safe in which ballot papers had been sealed the previous day. Although democratic elections are rather newly rooted in Ukraine, the approach taken to sitting with the ballot papers for the greater part of 48 hours seemed to have been grafted on to something much older, perhaps the tradition of sitting with a body for a night before a funeral. People came and went, coffee was drunk, meals eaten. I never once caught sight of a television set, or even a radio, yet the hours did not appear burdensome.

In town and village alike, we were given a warm welcome, our impertinent questions about relationships between Yanukovich and Yushchenko nominated Commission members readily answered, and all urged us to call again on Election Day. In several cases we did, though we visited other Polling Stations too, including one inside a hospital. Our first call was at 7.30am, to witness final preparations and the opening of the poll. All was done much as prescribed by the election law, but a surprise came a few minutes before 8.00am when a priest from the Uniate church (Greek Orthodox-Catholic) arrived to pray, at length, for everyone and everything connected with the election and liberally to splash holy water over all principal features of the room, including ourselves.

The first of several impromptu mini-parties given in our honour came at the third Polling Station of the day. Dressed mostly in orange (but not the hair), there was no question where our hostess’s allegiance lay. She proudly told us that both her sons had taken part in the

demonstration in Kiev that brought about the re-run election. She had thought her sixteen-year-old too young, but he “bought his train ticket and said he was going!”. She was grateful to someone in Kiev who took him in for a night when he got cold and hungry.

At the hospital, voter turnout was 100%; all had voted by the time of our 2.15pm visit and we found the Commission sitting around a long table ‘just waiting for 8.00pm’, the close of poll and start of the count. Again, it seemed that an age-old tradition was being drawn upon.

One particularly interesting village lived by fish farming, seasonally flooding the water meadows of the River Dneister. After the formalities of our visit, we were pleased to accept fish soup and stuffed pike as a form of high tea.

For the count, we visited a village that until three years ago was an entirely closed military community. A large proportion of the population remained Russian-speaking military, so the number of votes for Yanukovich was expected to be greater than almost anywhere else in Western Ukraine. The count was undertaken by the village Polling Station Commission itself, with great attention to the rules. Yanukovich polled 19%.

After the count, all was packaged-up with brown paper, much tape, many official stamps and Commission signatures and transported to the Territorial Election Commission. Arriving at 11.00pm, we found we were by no means the first and a long wait in an anteroom lay ahead for our hosts (yes, they had produced vodka and a bite to eat when the counting was complete). As international observers, we secured a front seat where the action was.

The packages of used and unused ballots were checked, together with the arithmetic of the results. Unfortunate village officials who had been in too much of a hurry and got something wrong were sent back to try again. All members of Polling Station Commissions who did not travel to town with the ballots were obliged to remain at their Polling Station until word came that their efforts had been approved. In many cases that meant a third all-night vigil.

Most Commissions, however, had got it right first time and the result was duly announced in the prescribed loud voice and transmitted by computer to Kiev. Many Polling Stations in the Lviv region recorded no more than six votes for Yanukovich, some none at all. By the time we got back to our hotel, Lviv was noisily celebrating its own results. Fireworks lit the sky, the bells of one of the several cathedrals rang out, cars with blaring horns, orange flags and shouting youths toured the streets.

Following the election, Victor Yanukovich filed many complaints about mostly minor irregularities in the conduct of the election, alleging a fixing of the vote in Yushchenko’s favour on much the same lines as was done for himself in November. A more substantial complaint was that a last-minute relaxation of the rule limiting home votes to the permanently immobile came too late and effectively disenfranchised thousands of elderly and temporarily unwell voters.

Despite the intervening New Year and Christmas holidays, the Supreme Court dealt briskly with all complaints and Victor Yushchenko was installed as President on 23rd January

To adapt Mark Twain, reports of the likelihood of an east-west split of Ukraine are greatly exaggerated, as is speculation on a major political rift between Ukraine and Russia. Granted, many Ukrainians see the Yushchenko victory in nationalist terms. However, pride in the fledgling republic, its gold and blue flag (more symbolic than most in its representation of the wheat and the sky of the endless steppe), its idealised Cossack heritage and Ukraine’s success

in putting itself on the world map with sporting and the Eurovision Song Contest successes – and now a revolution without broken heads – is much more widespread than that.

The degree of co-operation that I witnessed between Russian-speaking mine and engineering factory foremen from the Donbass and their western Ukrainian election commission colleagues was remarkable. Friendly working relationships were the norm, and I several times heard talk of return visits in warmer weather for a proper holiday. When I pressed the point of relationships with one native of Donetsk I was told, “No problems, we are all one nation.” The same was happening in south-eastern Ukraine, where Yushchenko workers had been drafted in from the west.

The great majority hope to leave behind the corruption, theft and shame of the Soviet-style political domination of a Dnipropetrovsk mafia that happens to be Russian-speaking, but they have no thought of renouncing linguistic, family and cultural links with Russia, nor of peremptorily severing the economic interdependence of the two countries.

President Yushchenko visited Moscow in the week immediately following his inauguration. Politically, that was a good move, and Vladimir Putin made some mollifying remarks about future relations. Yushchenko has gone on to seek improved relations with Europe and NATO. Ukraine has re-acquired a significance as the borderland that it has not had since 1945, and the new significance is perhaps greater than ever before.

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