
Guest Commentary

Ukraine: a new President, and old, unanswered questions

by Anatoli Voznytsa

Ukraine's Nov. 14 Presidential elections have produced a new "old" President. Virtually all of numerous political commentators, politicians, and other experts who had issued their prognoses, were proven right this time: Incumbent President Leonid Kuchma "convincingly" proved his superiority over the other candidates. Someday in the future, the "Kuchma phenomenon" will doubtless be the object of scientific investigation, because in him, as in a mirror, we can see a reflection of the entire complex history of Ukraine's transformation from a republic under Soviet Russia, into an independent state.

Indeed, Kuchma has shown proven himself to be a conscientious, and conscious executor of the orders he has received from abroad. Like all highly placed Ukrainian officials over past centuries, he has a pathological fear of developing and presenting any concepts on his own, that might be in the country's national interest.

And so, after more than five years under his rule, one of Europe's largest countries continues to vegetate, without aim or purpose.

An unparalleled fiasco

Neutral analysts have pointed out the unparalleled fiasco of all aspects of Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy. Production has continued to decline, even though many had thought it had nowhere to go but up. The debt burden has also continued to grow, and in the year 2000 alone, Ukraine will have to pay \$3 billion to foreign creditors. The situation with payment of pensions and wages is catastrophic, with delays ranging up to 18 months. In some communities, for years now, people have been receiving their wages in the form of (overpriced) consumer goods and services. Ukraine's currency, the grivna, has lost two-thirds of its value over the past three years.

On top of this, are Ukraine's foreign policy failures: complicated, and occasionally strained relations with neighboring Russia, and virtually no serious foreign investment into Ukraine's domestic economy. The popular mood is

grim. Criminality is running amok, and citizens feel utterly defenseless against it.

This makes it seem all the more incredible, that a man who only a few months ago enjoyed the support of a mere 10% of the population, could be re-elected President. Indeed, two years ago, when Kuchma first announced his intention to run for office again, he himself admitted that his main electoral rival was the nation's economy.

Growing lawlessness

Any reasonably unprejudiced eye can see that during Kuchma's administration, non-compliance with the law has now become the law of the land. The just-concluded Presidential campaign is the clearest confirmation of that assertion.

During the election campaign, the powers that be took countless measures to both directly and indirectly pressure citizens into casting their vote for Kuchma. "We've got what we've got," was a favorite saying of our first President, Leonid Kravchuk. "Only a blind man could fail to recognize our success!" was Kuchma's oft-repeated statement throughout the year leading up to the elections.

And the Ukrainian people, echoing the wisdom of their second President, have replied, "Yes, we're all blind, so it seems."

Where do we go from here? What can be done?

As the elections have just shown, only those who already had power, had any real chance of winning. The effort to push aside Kuchma's most dangerous rivals, such as Socialist Party head Oleksandr Moroz, former Premier Yevhen Marchuk, and Progressive Socialist Party head Natalia Vitrenko, went remarkably well.

Lesser known, young political leaders, whose time is not yet come, must now learn from these experiences and failures, so that their time will come more quickly.

The next test is already near at hand: The parliamentary elections in 2002 will test whether "the people have all hands on deck," as one opposition figure put it recently.