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Ukraine's Tipping Point

By Jackson Diehl
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KIEV, Ukraine -- Viktor Yushchenko ought to be the overwhelming favorite to win Ukraine's presidential election this year. A former prime minister with a telegenic sweep of graying hair, he is a proven reformer who promises to attack the endemic corruption and quasi-authoritarian thuggery of the current government. His coalition won the most recent national elections, and he's way ahead in the current polls.

Yet an encounter with Yushchenko in this wintry capital felt more like a meeting with a persecuted dissident than a democratic front-runner. The candidate described how his campaign events had been crudely disrupted in provincial cities. Criminal cases have recently been brought against more than 20 of his supporters, including his chief campaign financiers. Several opposition papers that support him have been closed down, and the sole television station that covers him honestly is in danger of being forced off the air. In case that's not enough, the ruling party is pushing a constitutional amendment that would strip the next president of most of his authority -- allowing the incumbent, Leonid Kuchma, to go on exercising power through his corruptly assembled majority in parliament.

"We live kind of underground," Yushchenko said. "It's obvious to everyone that Ukraine is one step away from state dictatorship."

Ukraine, a country of 50 million people between Russia and the European Union, is indeed at a tipping point -- and one that ought to be getting a lot more attention than it has, so far, from the Bush administration and its European allies. If this fall's presidential election is free and fair, it could decisively move Ukraine toward the consolidation of its still-fragile independence and alliance with the West. If it is corrupted, the country's current drift, toward Russia and the neo-authoritarian, neo-imperialist politics of Vladimir Putin, will accelerate.

As giant Ukraine goes, so, likely, will slip most of the other former Soviet states that now live uneasily between the expanding European Union and Russia, or in the nearby caucuses -- Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan. Putin and the former-KGB circle around him would like to fold them all into a new bloc dominated by Moscow and able to bargain as a quasi-equal with the EU and NATO. That's why it's not surprising that Putin's allies in Ukraine are on the offensive, employing the same tactics here against Yushchenko that succeeded in eliminating the democratic opposition in Moscow -- like the shutdown of independent media and prosecution of businessmen who finance non-government parties.

What has surprised and disappointed Yushchenko and his allies is the weak response from Brussels and Washington, which have a lot to lose from such a repartition of Europe. A conference here a week ago, organized by Western nongovernmental organizations and pro-Western political parties, resounded with talk of "Ukraine fatigue," an illness bred by exasperation with Kuchma's government and doubts about whether the country really belongs inside the Western community. For years, diplomats complain, Kuchma and his crowd have been saying that Ukraine would like to join NATO and the European Union, but they have been unwilling to take steps toward meeting the democratic standards of those clubs. So Western governments, while saying in principle that their institutions are open to Ukraine, haven't offered invitations, or even many incentives.

The Bush administration lately has reduced aid for fellowships, radio broadcasts and other democracy programs in Ukraine by 50 percent or more. "The position of the American administration has been a disappointment," Yushchenko told me. "The Ukrainian authorities haven't gotten any response at all from American political circles for disregarding democracy in Ukraine." He pointed out that Kuchma's cronies recently jerked U.S.-sponsored Radio Liberty from the air in Kiev, eliminating another outlet for non-government opinions.

Some administration officials have been working on the problem, and a meeting of the "deputies" group of senior foreign policy and defense officials recently considered what the United States might do this year to promote freedom in Ukraine and Belarus. But the administration's focus on the "greater Middle East" has tended to shift attention and resources from the borderlands of Eurasia. And some administration officials remain reluctant to pursue any policy that risks a fight with Putin.

In fact, the Bush administration has a better chance of stopping the creeping authoritarianism of Eastern Europe here than it does in Moscow. Putin angrily dismisses complaints about his consolidation of power, but a slap by the Council of Europe prompted Kuchma to revise the constitutional amendment he is pushing in parliament -- though not by enough. While they may admire Putin's strongman model, Kuchma and his gang fear rejection by the West and the complete subjugation to Moscow it could lead to. "The regime is afraid of one thing: the reaction of the West to what is happening in Ukraine," says Yushchenko. If they hear more of it in the coming months, democracy here might still be saved.