

Kravchuk and Yeltsin at Reelection

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Abstract: Leonid Kravchuk approached reelection differently than other post-Soviet leaders. His opponents defeated him in a fair election. Explanations for this deviation from the post-Soviet norm can be based on many factors, but those based on personal factors, as opposed to cultural factors, seem to offer the strongest interpretation. This conclusion underscores the importance of leaders in the democratization process.

Keywords: democratization, elections, Leonid Kravchuk, political leadership, Ukrainian politics, Boris Yeltsin

Russia and Ukraine are seemingly on different trajectories. Even as some of the excitement generated by the Orange Revolution fades amidst disagreements, recriminations, and betrayals by the political parties that were behind it, Ukraine is still a functioning, albeit messy, electoral democracy. Meanwhile, Russia has moved away from even the most basic standard of democracy. At a time when Russia and Ukraine are on divergent paths, it is useful to look back on a time when the two countries were at similar crossroads and to consider the factors that led to different paths being followed. The crossroad in question is the reelection campaigns of the first post-Soviet presidents for both countries—Boris Yeltsin in Russia and Leonid Kravchuk in Ukraine.

Yeltsin and Kravchuk shared many similarities. They came from analogous backgrounds and their careers in some ways paralleled each other. They became leaders of their home republics under Mikhail Gorbachev, which put them in a position to become president of their newly independent countries when the Soviet Union collapsed. Even the timing of their elections was similar.

The parallels continued once they were in office. Both faced significant opposition from their respective country's parliament, although they differed greatly in their responses to this opposition. Kravchuk compromised whereas Yeltsin used the military. Both saw their popularity drop as their terms wore on. A second significant difference between them, and the one that is this article's focus, is how their first term ended. Yeltsin won reelection in a tainted election while Kravchuk was defeated. This made Kravchuk a rarity among post-Soviet leaders. Of the fifteen

“first presidents” of Soviet successor states, only Kravchuk and Mircea Snegur of Moldova were defeated in direct elections.¹

An examination of these two individuals’ reelection campaigns can shed light on the role of political leaders in the democratization process. Some argue that leaders, particularly of newly established countries, can have a significant impact on democratic development. John Dryzek and Leslie Holmes noted this importance, particularly in the post-Soviet world:

Post-communist societies often lack not only civil society . . . but also the institutions, civic traditions, and culture of compromise that can make liberal democracy work, and can avoid a slide into political chaos and/or dictatorship. In this light the key to democratic consolidation is effective state leadership committed to democratic and constitutional principles.²

A president’s approach to the prospect of leaving power can have a tremendous impact on democratization. Of all the precedents established by first presidents, few may be more important. An initial leader agreeing to participate in a competitive election (or more to the point, allowing an election to be competitively contested by the opposition) can create political pressure on subsequent leaders to take similar steps. There is no way to test this, but the question is still worth asking—would the public pressure on Viktor Yanukovich in 2004 have been as great without the example of what Kravchuk did in 1994? This pressure can come from other political elites, who have embraced democratic rule of law, and from the public more generally. Likewise, when a first president leaves office because of constitutionally mandated term limits, it makes it very difficult for a later leader to ignore those limits.

Thomas M. Nichols called the peaceful passing of power from a leader to an opponent “a defining moment in the life of a young democracy.”³ Ukraine has passed this democratic milestone; Russia has not. Those who put a great deal of emphasis on leaders in democratization would argue that Ukraine passed the milestone because of Kravchuk’s actions. One issue that has bedeviled those who emphasize the role of leaders is the extent to which leaders have autonomy. To say Kravchuk is responsible for Ukraine peacefully transferring power to an opponent assumes that had he acted differently, the end result could have been different. To give him credit for allowing his opponent to campaign against him, competing in a fair election, and then leaving office when he was defeated assumes he decided to do these things, as opposed to feeling he had no choice or trying another course of action and failing.

That Yeltsin and Kravchuk shared many similarities but parted ways so dramatically when faced with the possibility of being defeated sets the stage for an examination of how their first terms ended. This article is less a full-blown comparison of the two leaders and more of an exploration of why Kravchuk deviated from the post-Soviet norm of leaders who were seemingly unwilling to compete in elections they could possibly lose. Yeltsin serves as a model of this norm because of the already mentioned similarities between the two men and also because of the similarities between their two countries. Given their size, location, and largely Slavic populations, it seemed more useful to compare these two leaders than to compare Kravchuk to President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, for example. After examining the relevant presidential elections, 1994 in Ukraine and 1996 in Russia, differing explanations as to why Kravchuk differed from the post-Soviet norms are discussed and evaluated.

Elections

Before examining the different manner in which the two presidents faced reelection, it is necessary to review the two elections' results. Kravchuk's first term ended early because both Kravchuk and the Soviet-era parliament agreed to early elections. Kravchuk initially resisted early presidential elections but relented under public pressure. By agreeing to those elections, Kravchuk faced reelection in 1994 instead of 1996. Kravchuk was defeated by Leonid Kuchma, who served as Ukraine's Prime Minister in 1992. Throughout the campaign Kravchuk criticized Kuchma's call for closer relations with Russia, claiming it would undermine Ukrainian independence. For his part, Kuchma focused on the need for economic reform, stressing his managerial skills and pragmatism.

Ukraine and Russia conduct presidential elections in a similar manner. Both use a two-round system in which a candidate needs to get a majority of votes to win in the first round. If no candidate gets a majority, the top two finishers compete in a second round that only requires a plurality for victory. Given that there are only two candidates in the second round, it is likely that one of the candidates will get a majority of the votes. However, requiring only a plurality for victory means that a large number of "spoiled ballots"—a vote cast without indicating support for either candidate—will not block someone from achieving victory.

In Ukraine, Kravchuk received the most votes in the first round of voting in the 1994 election: 37.7 percent to Kuchma's 31.3 percent with seven candidates on the ballot. Two weeks later, on July 10, 1994, Kuchma was able to win a two-person runoff 52 percent to 45 percent.⁴

Many commentators noted the lack of problems and irregularities during the election. Taras Kuzio writes "on the whole, they were held freely and fairly, according to outside observers. The most important confirmation of this was Kravchuk's failure to be re-elected."⁵ Sarah Birch argues that "democrats can take solace" in the way the election was run.⁶ Although they note the propriety of the election, neither Kuzio nor Birch asked why this was the case in Ukraine when it was so rare elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. Perhaps this is because elections in Ukraine were relatively early, before a post-Soviet norm was established. By 1997, what happened in Ukraine would be considered unique and worth investigating.

Yeltsin faced reelection in the summer of 1996. His main challenger was Gennady Zyuganov from the Communist Party. Russia used a two-round system of elections, similar to Ukraine. Yeltsin won the first round 35.2 percent to 32 percent. The third place finisher was General Aleksandr Lebed. After the first round, Yeltsin offered Lebed a newly created position within the government. With Lebed's support, Yeltsin won the second round 53 percent to 40.3 percent.

Many questioned the fairness of this election and critics pointed to the extent to which the Yeltsin campaign ignored spending restrictions and made ample use of governmental resources to promote Yeltsin's candidacy.⁷ Biased media coverage—Yeltsin was praised, his between-rounds heart attack covered up, Zyuganov condemned, and other candidates ignored until it became beneficial for Yeltsin to pump up Lebed's campaign—is another source of doubts about the fairness of this election. Michael McFaul made even stronger charges:

Falsification and intimidation of voters occurred in this election. In republics such as Tatarstan, Dagestan and Kalmikiya, Zyuganov's dramatic decline in support between rounds

can only be explained by the active intervention of state officials, be it stuffing ballot boxes or threatening local officials to deliver the correct vote count.⁸

Throughout the election there was the possibility of cancelation, and considerable speculation about whether Yeltsin would actually leave office if he were to lose. While this election was not as undemocratic as elections elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, particularly Central Asia, the difference between how events transpired in Ukraine and Russia is striking.

Competing Explanations

I examined four different sets of factors (cultural, political, international, and personal) to organize an examination of why events occurred differently in Ukraine and Russia. Each set of factors can be used as the foundation for a different argument of why Kravchuk acted differently from Yeltsin. These factors are directly related to each leader's role in the democratization process.

The larger a role assigned to personal factors, the stronger the argument that leaders play an important role in the democratization process. Conversely, an explanation of Kravchuk's behavior based on cultural, political, or international factors would de-emphasize leaders' autonomy and diminish the importance of leaders in democratization. An emphasis on cultural, political, or international factors would essentially argue that Ukraine and Russia would have ended up in roughly the same spot even if they had different founding presidents. One could even claim that if Yeltsin had been president of Ukraine and Kravchuk the president of Russia, the end results would have been largely the same.

Cultural Factors

An explanation based on cultural factors would argue that Ukraine's political culture was more democratic than Russia's. This cultural distinction would place different—stricter—expectations on Ukrainian leaders. According to this line of thought, the undemocratic measures acceptable in Russia in 1994 would not work in Ukraine. This time limitation is important. A more current examination of Ukrainian political culture could find significant differences with Russian political culture, but a more recent analysis would have to account for the influence of events such as the Orange Revolution, Kravchuk's actions in 1994, and Ukraine's desire to qualify for European Union membership.⁹ The effect of all of these could be to push Russian and Ukrainian political cultures further apart.

Since Ukraine became independent, there has been an attempt to influence Ukrainian attitudes, usually under the banner of "promoting democracy." Mark Beissinger notes that Washington spent \$65 million in the years leading up to the Orange Revolution to promote democracy. Much of this was funneled through American-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the National Endowment for Democracy. There were also independent NGOs, including the Soros Foundation, doing similar things.¹⁰ Kuzio also observed a generational difference. The younger Ukrainian generation has "acquired an essentially Western mind-set. Many young people have traveled, studied, and worked in Europe or North America, and most of them take the desirability of democracy as a given."¹¹ The effects of this generational change were heightened in the eyes of Viktoriya Topalova, who contended Ukraine and Russia are in the process of creating new national identities—Russia's based on its imperial past and Ukraine using a "future-orientated model" for its identity. One practical aspect of this, according to Topalova, is that "in

contrast to young Ukrainians, Russian youth often tend to side with the authorities.”¹² To the extent that Topalova’s analysis is accurate, Ukraine’s and Russia’s political cultures are becoming increasingly divergent. This is different, however, from claiming they were divergent in 1994.

An argument based on cultural factors is rooted in a belief that Ukrainian history is substantively different from Russian history. Birch, in *Elections and Democratization in Ukraine*, notes that western Ukraine, the wellspring of Ukrainian nationalism, had more experience with democracy stemming from the time it spent under Austro-Hungarian rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹³ This exposure to democracy could have created a larger democratic element in Ukrainian political culture than could be found in the Russian political culture that pressured Kravchuk not to rely on the tactics used by Yeltsin and other post-Soviet leaders.

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The argument against cultural factors has several aspects. First, a series of empirical studies examined public attitudes toward democracy in Ukraine and Russia. They generally found very few differences between the views commonly held in Ukraine and Russia.

William Reisinger, Arthur Miller, Vicki Helsi, and Kristen Hill Maher used survey data to compare respondents from Russia, Ukraine, and Lithuania on authoritarianism-related issues.¹⁴ The survey’s questions were designed to measure respondents’ desires for a strong leader and their support for an orderly society. The assumption underlying this work is that a more democratic political culture would lead respondents to be less supportive of strong leadership and feel less of a need for order.

The hypothesis guiding this study was “if history is a particularly important source of current values, scores on our measures of pro-authoritarian values should be highest among citizens of Russia and somewhat lower among citizens of eastern Ukraine, western Ukraine and Lithuania in that order.”¹⁵ The findings showed no difference between Russia and Ukraine and statistically insignificant differences between the two parts of Ukraine and between western Ukraine and Lithuania. In the end, they rejected culture-based explanations for Kravchuk’s and Yeltsin’s different behavior.

A subsequent study by Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger compared Russia and Ukraine, on the elite and mass level, on questions related to support for democratic principles.¹⁶ They found no differences in terms of support for democracy between Ukrainian and Russian masses. Elites in both countries were more democratic than either “mass” group; Ukrainian elites were found to be slightly more supportive of democracy. This difference was not great enough to support the claim that Ukraine’s political culture was more democratic than Russia’s.

Finally, James Gibson studied Russian and Ukrainian attitudes toward democratic institutions and processes. Although his goal was to measure the level and stability of support for democracy, the key result (for this article’s purposes) is that he reported

no differences between the levels of support for democracy in Russia and Ukraine.¹⁷ Although these three articles do not end the debate on the question of differences between Russian and Ukrainian political cultures, there are no studies of public opinion in the two countries from the same time period that indicate significant differences in popular attitudes toward democracy.

A second aspect of the argument against the cultural explanation of the differences in behavior between Yeltsin and Kravchuk rests on a dynamic conception of political culture. The argument that Ukrainian political culture is different is based on the different experience some Ukrainians had in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It also assumes nothing since that era, most notably the Soviet period, had much influence on Ukrainian political culture. A more dynamic view of political culture, one in which political culture is more affected by contemporary experiences, would contend that Russia and Ukraine emerged from the shared Soviet experience with political cultures that contained many similarities.¹⁸

Finally, there are those who discount the importance of what Ukrainians experienced under the Austrians because only western Ukrainians (also known as Galicians) had this experience. Orest Subtelny noted Galicians are not seen as “real Ukrainians” by people from other parts of Ukraine.¹⁹ He further contends that it is difficult to make arguments based on differences between Ukrainian and Russian political cultures when there is such a large Russified element in Ukraine.

Those who choose to stress cultural factors face difficulty because the different historical experiences between Ukraine and Russia, or even between a part of Ukraine and Russia, have to be seen as compensating for the many similarities between the two countries and for Russia’s influence in Ukraine. Cultural factors offer perhaps the least satisfying explanation of those under consideration. This is not to suggest that there are not cultural differences between Russia and Ukraine, or even between different parts of each country.²⁰ However, the political cultures of Russia and Ukraine were not so diametrically opposed in the mid-1990s, with Ukraine’s “democratic” culture and Russia’s “authoritarian” culture, to offer a compelling reason as to why the countries followed different paths regarding the first post-Soviet president seeking reelection.

Political Factors

Kravchuk and Yeltsin ran for reelection facing different types of opponents and each confronting a different set of political realities. These factors made it more difficult for Kravchuk to approach the election in a manner similar to Yeltsin. Yeltsin was running against Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party. Yeltsin’s campaign was able to depict a Zyuganov victory as a restoration of Communist power that would damage Russia in a variety of ways.²¹ Yeltsin successfully demonized his opponents largely because his opponents were easy to demonize. Those who would have otherwise criticized Yeltsin’s undemocratic behavior, both within Russia and internationally, did not because they did not want to see a Communist return to power. Yeltsin could justify his behavior on the grounds that it was saving Russia from the perils of Communist rule.

Kravchuk did not have this luxury. His opponent, Leonid Kuchma, had formerly served as prime minister. He could not successfully demonize the man he had previously asked to head the government. Furthermore, Kravchuk was probably more closely associated with the Communist Party than Kuchma. An opponent such as Kuchma robbed Kravchuk

of the ability to justify his actions by saying they were done to “save Ukraine.” Although Yeltsin-like steps would not have been impossible, such steps were harder to justify and less attractive.

One of the dominant features of Ukraine, and one that has a great deal of political relevance, is the regional ethnic and linguistic differences. Western Ukraine is more thoroughly Ukrainian, whereas more Russians and Russian speakers live in the east and south, particularly the Crimean peninsula. The political importance of these divisions are evident in the results from the 1994 presidential election. Kravchuk won more than 85 percent of the vote in western Ukraine, while Kuchma only won 10 percent. Kuchma received more than 70 percent of the vote in the south and east; Kravchuk received 22 percent in those regions.²²

These divisions add an element of instability to Ukrainian politics. However, some have argued that these divisions can actually be seen as a source of stability. Birch wrote “there are distinct regional, ethnic and resource-based cleavages in Ukraine that prevent populists from sweeping to power on the basis of waves of undifferentiated protests.”²³ Just as the divisions could constrain a would-be populist protest leader, they could also constrain a sitting president. Kuzio argued Ukraine escaped the “temptation of authoritarianism” because the divided nature of Ukraine “necessitates compromise politics and the search for consensus and the central ground.”²⁴ It could be argued that Birch and Kuzio had in mind something more than stealing an election. By using terms such as *authoritarian* and *populist sweeping to power*, both call to mind the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus. In another article, however, Kuzio, with Paul D’Anieri and Robert Kravchuk, narrowed this argument by stating “political power is sufficiently divided in Ukraine that it would likely be impossible for someone who lost an election to simply refuse to go.”²⁵

Claims that the political situation in Ukraine was a barrier to undemocratic behavior are weakened by more recent events. In 2004, the party in power, led by President Kuchma, engaged in wholesale fraud to ensure the victory of Kuchma’s handpicked successor, Yanukovich. This attempt failed when it provoked the Orange Revolution. But what matters here is despite the divisions and dangers, which were as present in 2004 as they were ten years earlier, Kuchma and Yanukovich were willing to try something Kravchuk was not.

One concern Kravchuk had—and Yeltsin did not—was that any attempt to concentrate power or even steal an election could potentially create a backlash. This made the price of gambling and losing in Ukraine potentially higher than it was in Russia. This danger did not, however, stop others in Ukraine from acting in a similar fashion to Yeltsin, but it did stop Kravchuk.

International Factors

An emphasis on international factors would contend Kravchuk was constrained by the way other governments, primarily Western governments, would react to a fraudulent election in a way that Yeltsin was not. However, to argue that it was Western influence that kept Kravchuk from following a path similar to the one Yeltsin took assumes that Ukraine was not only more susceptible to Western influence than Russia but also Armenia and Georgia. It also means assuming that Western influence in Ukraine was greater in 1994 than it was in 2004. These assumptions make this an unlikely scenario.

International factors were not completely irrelevant, however. The international actor with the most influence in Ukraine is Russia, and Russian influence was felt in two key

ways. First, Kravchuk did not wish to emulate the Russian example. According to Andrew Wilson, Kravchuk wanted to avoid the violent confrontations between president and parliament that he saw happening in Russia.²⁶ Kravchuk, ever disinclined to follow a confrontational path, saw where confrontation took Russia, which reinforced his preference for consensus and compromise. Kuzio, in *Ukraine Under Kuchma*, notes this link, stating that the violence Kravchuk saw in Moscow in October 1993 reinforced his “penchant for consensus politics.”²⁷

Second, Russian media exerted a strong influence in Ukraine. Russian television stations are widely watched in the southern and eastern Ukraine. In his review of the

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1994 election, Kuzio notes that Ukrainian networks gave greater coverage to Kravchuk, which is understandable—he was the sitting president—and international monitors found the media coverage relatively balanced, particularly by post-Soviet standards. Kuzio observes that “although Ukrainian television may have covered Kravchuk to a greater extent than Kuchma this was counterbalanced by Ostankino’s (now Russian Public Television) complete bias in favor of Kuchma.”²⁸ Had Kravchuk been able to dominate Ukrainian

media to the same extent that Yeltsin dominated the Russian media during his reelection campaign, it would not have paid the same dividends for Kravchuk. If Kravchuk had attempted to ensure his reelection, he would have required something more than media manipulation.

Personal Factors

A focus on personal factors would argue the differences between the two presidents’ backgrounds and personalities is the key to explaining the different paths they followed. Kravchuk and Yeltsin had similar backgrounds. Both were born in rural villages in the early 1930s.²⁹ They were both Soviet success stories—advancements made by the Soviet Union meant they had opportunities their parents did not. Both went to college, and joined the Communist Party at relatively young ages—Yeltsin at thirty and Kravchuk at twenty-four.

After they joined the party, their backgrounds diverged slightly. Yeltsin became a regional administrator and spent the early part of his career in Sverdlovsk. He eventually became the city’s party head. Kravchuk focused on ideology, and he worked primarily for the Ukrainian Communist Party in Kyiv. In 1980, he was named the head of the propaganda department for the republic’s party. Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power benefited both men. Gorbachev brought Yeltsin to Moscow and installed him as the head of the Moscow City Party Committee, providing him with the platform and profile he used to climb to even greater heights. Gorbachev had a less direct impact on Kravchuk’s career; the Soviet premier forced the aged leadership of the Ukrainian Communist Party to retire, creating opportunities for the advancement of younger officials, such as Kravchuk.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the two men found themselves in similar situations. The initial executive position held by both men was chairperson of their republic's parliament. Yeltsin was elected to this position by the Russian Parliament in May 1990, whereas the Ukrainian Parliament took the same step with Kravchuk two months later. Finally, both won a popular presidential election in 1991—Yeltsin in June and Kravchuk in December.

The one glaring difference in their backgrounds—Kravchuk's work in ideology as opposed to Yeltsin's in construction and administration—proved more important than one might expect. Wilson argues that Kravchuk had a very "Soviet" conception of politics, which he never lost. At the heart of this approach to government was an emphasis on elite compromise.³⁰ It seems entirely logical that a person such as Kravchuk, with a background in ideology, would internalize this approach to politics to a far greater extent than a provincial official in charge of construction. To Kravchuk, Yeltsin's direct, confrontational style of politics might have seemed odd and improper.

Kravchuk's personality also reinforced his inclination for compromise over confrontation. Often described as cautious or crafty, he was likened to a fox (as opposed to Yeltsin's charging bear). This personality difference is evident in how they dealt with their respective parliaments. Kravchuk compromised, over the timing of elections, for example, whereas Yeltsin ordered a military assault against his or at least the part of it that refused his order to disband.

Differences in both background and personality pushed Kravchuk toward compromise and consensus while Yeltsin opted for confrontation. At crucial junctures Kravchuk chose the safe option while Yeltsin was willing to follow a riskier course. Kravchuk preferred a gradual approach to economic reforms; during the Russian coup attempt of August 1991, he came out strongly against the cabal only after it was clear it was going to fail.³¹ Stressing personal factors is not to suggest Kravchuk would not fix an election because he was too "clean" or too much of a democrat to engage in such behavior. Rather, he was not willing to risk the confrontation that doing "whatever it takes" entails.

Conclusion

The divergent paths that Kravchuk and Yeltsin took when faced with the prospect of losing their reelection bids can perhaps best be explained by combining personal and political factors. Kravchuk's background and personality made him less inclined to run the risk of "staying in power at all costs" while at the same time the political situation in Ukraine increased the risks, were he to follow a Yeltsin-like path.

The international factors largely reinforced some of the basic ideas brought to the surface by the personal and political factors. The example of Russia made the already risk-adverse Kravchuk even less inclined to use confrontational tactics. The influence of the Russian media meant that the only way Kravchuk could ensure the continuation of his presidency was by using riskier, more direct tactics—wholesale fraud, arresting Kuchma, or canceling the elections. Such tactics went against Kravchuk's nature and carried with them the risk of dividing Ukraine.

A focus on both personal and political factors leaves open the question whether events would have played out differently had Yeltsin been the president of Ukraine or if Kravchuk was the Russian president. However, personal factors are at least part of the explanation, meaning Ukraine experienced an election-induced turnover of power because of a decision made by Kravchuk. The political situation in Ukraine might have made this the easy decision, but it was a decision nonetheless.

NOTES

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27. Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine Under Kuchma: Political Reform, Economic Transformation and Security Policy in Independent Ukraine* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 49.

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