

Ukraine's post-orange evolution: Askold Krushelnycky interviewed

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About the author

Toby Saul is a freelance journalist. His work has appeared in the [New Humanist](#) and other publications. After fifteen turbulent months of a hard-won democracy, Ukraine's people are again calling their leaders to account. Askold Krushelnycky talks to Toby Saul about how far the orange revolution's ideals have survived.

On 26 March 2006, Ukrainians vote in parliamentary [elections](#) which may see Viktor Yanukovych regain a significant share of the vote for his Party of Regions after being swept out of power in the orange revolution of November 2004-January 2005.

The vote will be a test of the success of the democratisation process in former Soviet states, the allure of the European Union and the tenacity of Moscow's [influence](#) over its former satellites. It may also lead to the communal violence that appeared to threaten the outcome of the ballot a year ago.

If the orange revolutionaries consolidate the power they [secured](#) in 2005, Ukraine will have decisively moved away from the post-Soviet era of institutionalised corruption. It will also have moved closer to western Europe. But if Yanukovych claws back a large measure of the vote, more intimate ties with Russia and membership of an economic zone dominated by Moscow would unravel much of what the revolution has achieved in the past year.

Askold Krushelnycky, an Englishman of Ukrainian parentage, has written a book, [An Orange Revolution](#), charting the course of the orange revolution and the often dramatic, sometimes entirely terrifying, events that culminated in mass demonstrations in the country's capital, Kyiv (Kiev).

Askold Krushelnycky, the subject of Toby Sauls interview, was born in Britain to Ukrainian parents. He is a journalist whose work has appeared in many publications including the *Independent*, *Sunday Times* and *International Herald Tribune*. He currently lives in Prague. He is the author of *An Orange Revolution* ([Harvill Secker, 2006](#))

The [orange revolution's](#) dual figureheads, Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, appear in the book as near-heroes. Yushchenko showed considerable spirit in the bizarre case of his facial disfigurement through poisoning, allegedly by the Yanukovych faction. [Tymoshenko](#) comes across as an impetuous and gloriously passionate patriot. But in the period since they took office in Ukraine, they have spectacularly fallen out, and it is this split that threatens to allow the old regime to reassert itself. I asked Krushelnycky if he is disappointed by the way the leaders of the revolution have behaved in office.

"The big question that everyone's asking is whether they can overcome their differences and form a coalition", Krushelnycky says. "My personal feeling is that they will because, however egotistic they are, they must understand that on their own they're going to be destroyed. And if they're tempted to make an alliance with Yanukovych, he's going to discard them at the earliest opportunity. Logically, it's a no-brainer for them. They've got to work together and come to some kind of accommodation. Otherwise, it will be a disaster for Ukraine."

Did Krushelnycky feel disappointment with Yushchenko? "In the same way that most of his supporters

were disappointed. It was impossible to change the country from head to toe in such a small amount of time. But I think he could be more aggressive with some of these people", referring to Ukraine's numerous corrupt officials. "He should have ensured that some of them were put before a court. It would have sent an important message. I think that he's weaker than I thought he was. He's compromised with people whom he's previously called criminals. I believe that he's an infinitely better human being than his predecessors. But as a politician he has shown himself to be inept, and he's got to learn faster than he seems to be learning."

In late 2004 it finally seemed as if Ukraine had at last found in Yushchenko the hero to lead it out of the post-communist era. Yet his image [began](#) to tarnish and distort as rumours reached the west that he may not have been untouched by corruption himself. Some said that his views were much further to the right than an enthusiasm for market capitalism, that they bordered on extreme nationalism and were riddled with prejudice against Jews.

"I just haven't found any evidence of that", says Krushelnicky of the anti-semitism accusation. "If there was any real evidence that he had been corrupt and taken bribes, you can rest assured that the people who are now the opposition, but were then in the government, would have presented it. And long before the elections, some documents came to light that there would be an attempt to use the smear of anti-semitism."

A lasting effect

More insidious, perhaps, were rumours of western, and specifically American, interference in the elections. [Pora](#) ("It's time"), the main student organisation among the revolutionaries, was thought to have received funding and training from the United States.

Krushelnicky sees it differently: "As for help from western organisations, they did get help but they were quite open about it. It wasn't secret. Ever since communism collapsed, there have been NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in Ukraine. There were dozens of projects where people would stay in the United States or Britain for a while. Of course this influenced people, showed them a different viewpoint. Pora received money to hold training sessions where local people were told what they could demand, how to organise. Yanukovich and Russia were trying to paint that as if it was all mapped out at Langley" (referring to the Washington headquarters of the US CIA).

"I went among these people", says Krushelnicky. "Sure, there was organisation, but I've got no doubt that most people went there because they wanted to. You could see it in their faces, their eyes."

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Krushelnycky believes that Moscow, far more than Washington, tried to guide the outcome of the [2004 Ukrainian elections](#). "(Russian president Vladimir) Putin sent his top spin doctor down to Ukraine, which pissed off even supporters of Yanukovich because it was like, 'the Russians don't think we can spin our own rubbish'."

Today, Russia has a great deal to lose from a consolidation of the pro-democracy movement. Its proposed common economic zone which democrats in Ukraine and elsewhere see as the latest attempt to impose Moscow's hegemony on the former Soviet states depends on the acquiescence (or at least the participation) of Ukraine. The [Common \(or Single\) Economic Space](#) (CES, or EEP) is a trade area that would link the two countries, plus [Belarus](#) and Kazakhstan (and potentially others in the future), representing a significant chunk of Russia's trade with former Soviet states.

Krushelnycky says: "The people who voted for Yushchenko and Tymoshenko may be disillusioned with those people and the split between them. They may be disappointed that there haven't been faster and deeper reforms, but they're never going to support Yanukovich. It did come precariously close to bloodshed. There was brinkmanship. Maybe the stakes are higher and more dangerous this time round. If the people associated with the orange revolution retain their hold, that does mean the end for this reconstituted common economic zone, this Soviet or Russian empire by another name. Ukraine is pivotal to that. Belarus will sign up as will some of the smaller central-Asian states, but without Ukraine it's meaningless."

Ukraine's stab at democratisation through popular action has not found the leaders it [deserved](#). The country's economy, scandalously exploited after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has not yet delivered decent standards of living for the majority of Ukrainians. Neither has the orange revolution yet conquered the country's appalling levels of corruption. What does Krushelnycky think of it one year on, on the eve of new and perhaps dangerous elections?

"I was caught up in the euphoria and maybe my expectations were inflated", he says. "Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, who were trusted by the ordinary Ukrainians who supported the revolution, disappointed them not because of political differences there was very little that separated them politically but because of personality-driven stuff. But I think Ukraine did turn a corner, and for people of whatever political persuasion, it was the first time ever that they felt they did have political muscle."

"Most Ukrainians had just got used to there being no connection between their ballot and the result. This time they saw that they could influence events. And you can't unlearn that. That's the lasting positive element. These people found their own strength and confidence that they can influence the course of their own lives and destinies."