Twenty Years in Ukraine

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Events that Led to the War

By

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and Sophie Vounder

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To Oksana Litynska, friend, mum, and wife
who supported and endured.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP
Ukraine's Justice and Development Party

AUGB
Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain

DNR
Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika (Donetsk People's Republic)—a self proclaimed, unrecognised state backed by the Russian Federation comprising several *raynoni* (districts) of the Donetsk *oblast* (region) of Ukraine.

FSB
Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation%
%
GRU
Main directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation

HUR MO
Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense

IMF
International Monetary Fund

KGB
State Security Committee for the Soviet Union from 1954-1991.

LNR
Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika (Luhansk People's Republic)—a self-proclaimed, unrecognised state backed by the Russian Federation comprising several *raynoni* (districts) of the Luhansk *oblast* (region) of Ukraine.

MEP
Member of European Parliament

OUN
Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists

OUUVB
Union of Ukrainians in Great Britain

SBU
Security Service of Ukraine

SUAOC
Sobornopravna Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church

UAOC
Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church

UDAR
Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform

UGCC
Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

UPA
Ukrainian Insurgent Army

INTRODUCTION

Ukrainian Galicia (*Halychyna* in Ukrainian) can easily be confused with Spanish Galicia. Despite being separated by 3,000 kilometres, both Galicias have a lot more in common than their names. The original proto-Celtic "salanos" for salt has been transformed into a number of words with "hal" or "gal" roots still used around the world today.

The Welsh speaker who is asking for a little more halen with her Glamorgan sausage is invoking the memory of thousands of years of Celtic cultural domination of Europe where salt meant wealth and severed heads meant war victories. Occasionally ruled by their own monarchs, but more often than not forced to join their bigger and more aggressive neighbours, Ukrainian and Spanish Galicians have nonetheless retained their identity for centuries. The history of Galicia at the beginning of the twenty-first century has been firmly linked with the history of the rest of Ukraine, more so than at any other point since Kyivan Rus. In the early modern period, Galicia was unified with the right bank of the Dnieper River under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was the largest, the most democratic and ethnically diverse country within Europe. It was here that corporal punishment of children was banned in 1783, and Copernicus first proposed that the Earth orbits the Sun. Combining influences from modern European art and the traditional embroidery and axe-wielding dances of the region's mountain-dwelling population, the Hutsuls, Galicia established a unique national artistic tradition, not dissimilar to the English Arts and Crafts movement. Galicians see themselves as the key driver of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the so-called "Ukrainian Piedmont" from which the independent Ukraine started. During the Soviet times, Galicia found itself in the role of a platform supporting about a million Soviet troops occupying a third of Europe. Galicians enthusiastically supported Mikhail Gorbachev, who spoke good Ukrainian, and whose Ukrainian mother taught him the national melancholic songs. Despite being united with Eastern Ukraine from 1939, east Galicia has retained its separate dialect, cuisine and religion as well as a resolutely condescending view of the "East Ukrainian barbarians" who have been coming in countless hordes to absorb even the slightest drop of Galician culture, the glorious Austrian Crown Land. Galicia became part of the Austrian Empire in 1772, eight years before the

death of the Austrian Empress and the Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa who, despite or maybe because of having 16 children managed to redraw the map of Europe by "executing her plans worthy of a man of genius", so proclaimed one of her arch enemies, Frederick the Great. Sitting in Lvivian coffee houses and complaining about tourists, Galicians attract a certain curiosity from other Ukrainians. Their language is amusing to the Eastern Ukrainian ear. The Polish, German and Yiddish admixtures somehow combine for a softer and more elegant sound than that of the Russian language which dominated the East until recently. As far as the cuisine goes, *varenyky* and *borscht* are *varenyky* and *borscht*, no matter where in Ukraine you are. But, much to Eastern Ukrainian's dismay, Galicians would rather have a poppy seed cake with their coffee than biscuits with their tea. Galicians' insistence on going to church every Sunday and sticking to various and complex religious rituals throughout the year is less understandable. I have heard an educated mum from Luhansk saying she would never allow her child to play the characters of "devil" or "death" in a Christmas panto called *vertep*. A teenage boy who came to visit Lviv from Crimea and whom I took to a church, asked me after a few minutes, when was all that howling going to end.

Galicians too secretly think that they are the only proper Ukrainians and that without them Ukraine would not have existed in the first place. They subdivide all Ukrainians into *svidomi* (conscious) and *nesvidomi* (unconscious). The conscious Ukrainians, to which category Galicians classify themselves, is a very hard group to join. Gladwell's 10,000 hours would not even scratch the surface. Until recently Every Eastern Ukrainian, *skhidniak*, was seen as a bit of a *moskal* (a slightly derogatory term for a Russian) or even a *katsap* (a derogatory term for a Russian) who were unconscious Ukrainians, until and unless they gave up their life or suffered unimaginable hardships for the fatherland. Even then, the first Russian word these supposedly conscious Ukrainians utter risks moving them into the unconscious category faster than a Galician nun could say Hail Mary. Galicians also think deep down that Easterners should become a little more like them, similar to how the French think that the English, the "rosbifs", should become a little more sophisticated and laidback.

Ukrainian policy has been characterised not by veering from the political left to the political right, but rather from the pro-Russian to the pro-Western phases. Anastasia's relatives were jostling past a series of rulers, from Leonid Kuchma, the second president who won the *bulava* from Leonid Kravchuk on the pro-Russian ticket, to Viktor Yushchenko with a vehemently pro-Ukrainian schtick, then back to the pro-Russian Yanukovych and the

anti-Russian Poroshenko. Before Volodymyr Zelensky, the comic, arrived out of nowhere, took the political Hoverla[1] by storm and seems unlikely to disappear rapidly into the void of the Kerch straight. The pro-Russian leaders, however, had an important nuance. All of them, to some degree, betrayed their pro-Russian election ticket and focused on pro-European policies, further fuelling the treacherous Russian stereotype against Ukrainians as "khokhols" (a pejorative term for a Ukrainian). This idea of treason against the Moscow ruler goes back at least to the times of Ivan Mazeppa, the Ukrainian Cossack leader, who sided with Charles XII of Sweden against Peter the First (Great) of Russia at the beginning of the eighteenth century. For 150 years his name was publicly cursed in Orthodox churches, along with other unsavoury characters who challenged Russian tsars. Not the Orthodox Church but the Russian tsars.

Our book about Ukrainian Galicia from 1902 to 2002 is an unearthing of our family stories intertwined with the historical events spanning the 100 years from the Austro-Hungarian empire to independent Ukraine. To adjust Oscar Wilde's well-worn phrase, "The one charm of the [Galician] past is that it is the past". The twentieth century in Galicia was unrivalled in the amount of turbulence this land saw. England, for instance, might easily point to the seventeenth century as a plausible rival. Starting the century with the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, it progressed into a civil war, the beheading of the king, regular visits from the plague with the Fire of London bridging the gap between the two biggest outbreaks. Yet seventeenth-century English turbulence gave rise to the flourishing eighteenth century. For Galicia, the unimaginable violence of the twentieth century turned into major turbulence at the beginning of the twenty-first. Ukraine, now at the youthful age of 32, already established as one of Europe's poorest countries, is nonetheless strategically important and not devoid of a certain beguiling presence on the world's stage. We look at five Ukrainian presidents, all of them white and male, but none coming from the lavish background of chauffeur-driven Rolls Royces and after-school clubs, though this has not stopped them from ensuring that their children were. These presidents carefully crafted an image of humble beginnings, rife with hardship, in order to ally themselves with the confident and wilful sentiment amongst Ukrainians that has emerged from the political adversity that they have faced. Our book provides an insight into how independent Ukraine came to

[1] Hoverla is the highest mountain in Ukraine, standing at 2061 metres, situated on the border between Galicia and Transcarpathia.

being. Sifting through family photographs we offer readers glimpses of an old Galicia which gave birth to modern Ukraine.

LEONID KUCHMA 2002-2004

Fig. 1-1

Our story begins in the dying years of Leonid Kuchma's presidency. Kuchma came to power in 1994, following the brief and tumultuous rule of the first post-independence president Leonid Kravchuk. Kravchuk was a skilled politician who managed to offend no one, primarily because he did very little. He is remembered, jokingly, as a man who did not need an umbrella in the rain – he would always remain dry by managing to avoid raindrops. Kuchma was the opposite of Kravchuk. He seemed to attract raindrops, indeed, to revel in them. Sometimes the raindrops would turn into blood. People tend not to remember the second man on the moon or the second woman in space. Ukrainians remember their second president very well indeed.

Kuchma had humble origins. Michelle Obama famously came from the South Side of Chicago, which was everything her interviewer needed to know about her background. Kuchma came from the village of Chaikine, with a population of 296, in the far north of Ukraine. Some of the readers might be less familiar with Chaikine than Chicago, but the US citizens residing in South Side Chicago might have reconsidered the nickname Chiraq they gave to their side of town following the briefest of visits to Chaikine. Kuchma's mother toiled in a Soviet kolkhoz for food and literally a few pennies – she was paid less than a rouble per day. His father died during the Second World War. Like many impoverished British aristocrats of the nineteenth century, Kuchma married early and he married well. Lyudmyla Kuchma, née Tumanova, was the daughter of the chief engineer of Pivdenmash, a top-secret rocket-manufacturing factory with a payroll the size of a medium town, located within a secret city of Dnipropetrovsk in the largest secret state on Earth, the USSR. The marriage was enormously beneficial to Kuchma's career, and by 1986 he was the director of Pivdenmach (*Uzhmash* in Russian). In 1992, when Pivdenmash was making fewer SS-18 Satan ballistic intercontinental rockets and more trolleybuses, Kuchma left the rockets business and became first the prime minister and then the president of Ukraine. This rapid career development from a hut in the post-war village of Chaikine to the Mariinsky Palace, a former imperial residence in Kyiv, established a well-sized sting in his tail aimed at amassing power and money. Kuchma's rags-to-riches story is by no means unique. Kuchma shared his lowly origins with Andy Hamilton, one of the Founding Fathers of the USA.

However, instead of creating the world's most stable financial system which Hamilton built from scratch, Kuchma created a system of oligarchy where a handful of families controlled the economy of Ukraine, and the majority of the population remained in a state of poverty and disillusionment. Similar

to Russia, a few families developed a firm grip over Ukraine, severely limiting consumer choice, stifling innovation and controlling prices of key commodities. This hold made new entrants virtually impossible in all key sectors of the economy, also limiting foreign investments. Kuchma believed that the reason he won his second term in 1999 was due to his mission to carry on building a stable multi-vector oligarchy at home, playing oligarchs skilfully against each other and continuing with a versatile multi-vector foreign policy, where Kuchma would reap benefits from flirting with both the West and Russia. The Ukrainian economy, completely dependent on Russia, grew steadily in the early 2000s, lagging behind Russia, but outperforming many other post-Soviet states. The economic growth, which continued until 2008, was mainly mediated by the exploitation of the remnants of outdated Soviet manufacturing and moderated by the oligarchs' stranglehold on the economy. Nonetheless, any growth after a decade of the sharpest economic downturn the land has ever seen was a blessing. Kuchma is the only Ukrainian president ever to have served two terms. As he was toying with the idea of changing the Constitution to allow himself the third term, just like any self-respecting post-Soviet leader would, the unexpected and occasionally violent movement called *Ukrayina Bez Kuchmy,* "Ukraine Without Kuchma", put a stop to his visions of playing with his grandchildren in the Mariinsky Palace until his death. The non-violent movement was sparked by the murder of a prominent critic of Kuchma's regime Georgiy (Giya) Gongadze, an outspoken Ukrainian journalist of Georgian origin. Kravchuk, just like Yeltsin and Gorbachev, had always been scared of one thing alone—the KGB. Kuchma was not. Distracted by his blissful eight-year love affair with power, Kuchma forgot about the KGB and its newer incarnations, the SBU in Ukraine and the FSB in Russia. Every conversation of Kuchma was studiously recorded by Mykola Melnychenko, one of his chief security officers, before, at the appropriate moment, being released for the general public to enjoy. During one of the conversations, Kuchma is heard fuming over Gongadze's articles criticising his rule, saying that he wanted to get rid of Gongadze, even if Chechens were only to kidnap the journalist and take him to Chechnya, a republic of Russia. Kuchma might never have heard about Thomas Becket, Henry the Young King or the almost certainly apocryphal "will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?", yet Kuchma's words were interpreted by his inferiors in the time-honoured tradition of any authoritarian state leader. Just like Becket, Gongadze was killed by the brawny henchmen of his foe. Gongadze's head was severed and buried away from his body. Kuchma's rule could be characterised as the Dark Ages of Ukrainian modern history, but even at the time, the murder of a journalist appalled Ukrainians. When

the Melnychenko tapes became public, it was not just Ukrainians who were bewildered by Kuchma's methods of governing. Americans, much as they must have disapproved of Gongadze's fate, listened particularly carefully to the part of the tape where Kuchma was discussing how best to sell Kol'chuha, an advanced system of detecting aeroplanes, to Saddam Hussein, just in time for the forthcoming NATO invasion. NATO members were so outraged by this behaviour, that they conveniently forgot English and started speaking, God have mercy on their souls, French, so that it was the French alphabet that determined who sat where during the 2002 NATO summit. Leonid Kuchma of ***U****kraine* was used to being sat next to Tony Blair of the ***U****nited* Kingdom and George Bush of the ***U****nited* States. That year, however, Kuchma was placed next to *Turqui,* well away from *Les Etats-Unis* and *Le Royaume-Uni*.

But that was not the full extent of the Melnychenko scandal. The Ukrainian public was dismayed at Kuchma's extraordinary use of foul and primitive language, characteristic of the "red directors" who ran major state factories but not at all associated with what the electorate thought the political elite should sound like. Allow me to explain to you that swear words have a very different cultural colouring in Ukraine than in English-speaking countries. A middle-class good-natured "fuck off" directed at a friend offering to pay for yet another of your Costa americano could not be further away from the equivalent Ukrainian expression of *pishov na khuy*, literally "go onto one's dick" which usually indicates a major escalation of one's anger and cannot, under any circumstances, be directed at a friend at Costa Coffee. Kuchma also liked using the word *bliad*, "whore", in every other sentence. This word is used as a way of making sure the interlocutors pay sufficient attention to what their boss is telling them, but it is not designed to induce the highest level of alertness. For that, Kuchma used the term *yob tvoyu mat, "*fuck your mother", to show the highest level of disapproval, but also at the end of an instruction to emphasise its importance. Once Ukrainians had a good listen to the tapes, thousands of them descended on Kyiv, demanding that this time the term *pishov na khuy* should now be applied to Mr Kuchma himself. A lot of the protesters came from Galicia, mostly truculent young people blamed by the authorities for driving up discontent in Kyiv. To snuff out the fire, Kuchma targeted Ukrainian-speaking youths in the predominantly Russian-speaking Kyiv with sadistic violence. Kuchma thought he could gobble up the protesters in a few minutes. The protests lasted for over a year and produced a bunch of new leaders who would play a decisive role in future dramatic events. Viktor Yushchenko and Yuliya Tymoshenko were united in opposition to Kuchma's rule, their alliance forged by the unpredictability of Kuchma's response to the protests. In the end, Kuchma's

behaviour turned out to be rather vegetarian by the brutal standards of other world dictators. Not one protester was killed and just over 200, mainly kids from Galicia, were arrested. The protests tired Kuchma enough for him not to push for the clearly unconstitutional third term, although the Constitutional Court of Ukraine very kindly allowed him this opportunity. In a hasty and rather inexplicable move, Kuchma decided to name an unlikely successor, a sulky and savage Viktor Yanukovych, who, in his youth, served two prison sentences for robbery. Yanukovych enjoyed the support that he received in the south and the east of Ukraine, but his main asset was that Kuchma trusted him with his life and his assets. Towards the end of his rule, Kuchma's verbal and behavioural disregard for the shallow aesthetics of the Ukrainian intelligentsia found its way into the literary arena as well. In the last year of his rule, like most other post-Soviet leaders, Kuchma decided to gift a book to the population of Ukraine; his magnum opus named *Ukraine is not Russia*. The people tasked with writing the book for Kuchma often seemed to have opposing views on the many subjects of the book, hence *Ukraine is not Russia* turned out to be a fitting finale of Kuchma's opera, rich in the number of vectors, poor in the content.

Kuchma had to face Russia's new president Vladimir Putin. As Ukrainian state assets were being carved up throughout the 1990s, Putin was a little-known retired KGB officer serving as a deputy to St Petersburg's larger-than-life mayor Anatoly Sobchak. During Kuchma's reign, Putin was relatively weak, busy creating his own circle of rich boys and getting rid of Yeltsin's oligarchs. He was promoting his friends far more vigorously than Kuchma. Most of them became billionaires, whereas Kuchma's friends remained mere millionaires. Even Putin's university advisor Vladimir Litvinenko (not to be confused with the poisoned Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko) became the only university rector on the world's rich list with over a billion dollars. Putin got rid of political opposition quickly, creating a chimaera called "systemic opposition", political groups opposing him in name but supporting most of his policies. Much to his regret, Kuchma failed to create this type of "opposition" in Ukraine. However, Kuchma was also a philosopher, as his interview with Dmytro Gordon revealed. His uncomplicated philosophy was achieving macroeconomic stabilisation. Undaunted by a decade of economic decline, Kuchma plunged into a battle with macroeconomic instability, and he won it. At the end of 2021, he was recognised as Ukraine's most successful president. His noisy inclusion into the small pantheon of Ukraine's greats would have seemed like a bad joke to the protesters of *Ukrayina Bez Kuchmy* (Ukraine Without Kuchma). Yet history, always keen to rubber-stamp the most unlikely of developments, always has the final word.

One of Kuchma's chiefs of staff was Viktor Medvedchuk, who we will come back to towards the end of this book. For now, it suffices to mention that Medvedchuk had the foresight to become close friends with Mr Putin, a new and not yet very confident president of Russia. They holidayed together in Medvedchuk's villa in Crimea. Putin liked Medvedchuk's wife, Oksana Marchenko, a good-looking Ukrainian TV anchor. It was only natural that when Medvedchuk's daughter Daria was born in 2004, he became her godfather. During the subsequent years, there was no Ukrainian politician who benefited from a friendship with Mr Putin more than Medvedchuk. Medvedchuk was a lawyer in Soviet times famously "defending" an anti-communist poet Vasyl Stus, who ended up dying in prison following a rigged trial where his lawyer essentially agreed with prosecutors. In the independent Ukraine, he became both a billionaire and the voice of the pro-Russian faction of Ukrainian politics. He abandoned the Marxist-Leninist discourse about international solidarity and workers' rights focusing instead on his own solidarity with Russian oligarchs and his business rights. His friendship with Putin spawned immense suffering in Ukraine. Medvedechuk assured him that Russian troops would be welcomed in Ukraine with the traditional bread and salt.

Following his retirement, Kuchma has not fled Ukraine. He pocketed enough dividends from the oligarchical system he created and from arranging a beneficial marriage for his daughter, Olena, to ensure a lavish lifestyle. Olena Kuchma's second marriage was to one of her father's smartest and nicest oligarchs, Viktor Pinchuk. Olena and Viktor married in 2002, the year Kuchma started preparing for his exit. The couple are into charity, pro-Western politics and art galleries. Occasional distasteful behaviours such as buying Britain's most expensive property in Phillimore Gardens are mere scratches on the otherwise pristine steel businesses of the Pinchuks. As he was leaving, Kuchma was smart enough not to engender resentment amongst the hungry newcomers to the Ukrainian political top. He was, after all, the only president to have served two terms, *bliad*.

The 2004 Maidan (The Orange Revolution)

In 2004 Kuchma rigged the presidential elections and Viktor Yanukovych, Kuchma's prime minister, fraudulently won against the popular candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, triggering a series of events later called the Orange Revolution, the Maidan (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti* is the Ukrainian for Independence Square) and, after 2014, the First Maidan. There has never been an event in Ukraine's history that gave so much happiness to so many

people at the expense of so little pain as the Orange Revolution. Orange-clad Galicians eating oranges had to wedge themselves between middle-class Russian-speaking Kyivans and smartphone-wielding teenagers pitching up on a whim from pretty much any part of Ukraine and even the neighbouring countries. Galicians, as always, claimed victory, saying that the revolution would not have happened without them. It is true that many Galicians came to Kyiv. But it was Kyiv's middle classes, fed up with Kuchma's authoritarian rule, the flamboyant lifestyles of his cronies, and the choice of Yanukovych, Kuchma's successor entirely subservient to Moscow, without whom the revolution would have had no chance. Ukrainians' outrage with the handful of families controlling the Ukrainian economy was palpable but eventually produced little. It was not until 2017 when the first dent in the financial security of the super-rich appeared: Paradise Paper's leaks of their confidential financial papers finally removed the red carpet rolled out in front of Ukrainian and Russian oligarchs in tax havens. Some multi-millionaires supported the protesters, Yevhen Chervonenko and Petro Poroshenko amongst others, which earned the Maidan a joking description of a revolution of millionaires against billionaires. The Maidan attacked all politically exposed people who supported the 2004 fraudulent presidential elections. Up to a million people occupied the central square of Kyiv, *Maidan Nezalezhnosti*, Independence Square. Most western and central Ukrainian regions officially refused to recognise Yanukovych, whereas Southern and Eastern regions refused to recognise Yushchenko and prepared to secede from Ukraine. On November 28, over 3000 delegates from 17 regions of Ukraine gathered in Severodonets'k to form an alternative government in Kharkiv. Drunk with liberty, Kyiv did not care about them. Kyiv was listening to popular singers, eating oranges and increasingly speaking Ukrainian. The anthem of the Orange revolution was the catchy tune *Razom nas bahato, nas ne podolaty*, "Together we are many, we cannot be defeated". It was produced by a little-known band called Gryndzholly, meaning "sleigh", anglicised, somewhat counterintuitively, to GreenJolly. The band was from the Galician city of Ivano-Frankivsk, and the song spread quickly to Kyiv, infecting hundreds of thousands with its revolutionary beat. The song was great for the Maidan but proved too political for the Eurovision Song Contest held in Kyiv in 2005, where it only received 30 points, finishing in nineteenth place. The only country to award full points to it was, remarkably, Poland.

By December 2004, there were too many people to disperse, and the special forces and military units who were called to quash the protests returned to their barracks. Kuchma did not dare to kill thousands. The carnival-style revolution lasted until Viktor Yanukovych, the official victor of the

elections, had to sue for peace and submission by recognising the ruling of the Supreme Court in favour of a re-run of the presidential elections, which Yanukovych lost to Viktor Yushchenko. Yanukovych's ousting heralded a swing to the most pro-Ukrainian and pro-Western policy since the times of Ivan Mazepa, a Ukrainian Cossack leader and mentor of Peter the First of Muscovy, who in 1709 sided against his mentee with Charles XII of Sweden. To Yanukovych's credit, supported by Kuchma and the chief of his election campaign, Serhiy Tihipko, he found arguments for South-Eastern secessionists that prevented the break-up of Ukraine. As Ukraine was heading inexorably for a winter of social turmoil, breaking the young and thin mould of modern Ukrainian history, Putin was getting seriously annoyed. Firstly, Yushchenko was alive, despite an attempt on his life. Yushchenko was poisoned by a compound called TCDD (2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzodioxin) found in Agent Orange (one has to congratulate Mr Putin on his sense of humour) used by the US military in Vietnam. Secondly, the Russian president was humiliated by Yanukovych's eventual defeat after having congratulated him on his victory. Thirdly, Putin could not believe that Russian cyber espionage and their cyber attacks, to which many US and British institutions had fallen victim as early as in the late 1990s, as well as a comprehensive infiltration of Ukrainian institutions by Russian agents, were unable to prevent Yanukovych from staying in power. That Yushchenko could get away with winning, despite a failed attempt on his life and Putin's unequivocal support of Yanukovych showed what an unruly younger brother Ukraine would turn out to be. The slogans of the Orange Revolution that emphasised Ukrainian unity against electoral fraud proved irksome to the Kremlin for a good reason. Perhaps the scariest moment of Putin's rule, the 2011 Russian protests against a similarly cynical electoral fraud in Russia, used very similar slogans. Putin, however, took a very different stance to the 2011 protests. He ignored the leaders and arrested random participants, who were subject to disproportionate and devastating prison sentences that the courts passed under Putin's watchful eye. The dawn of Russian liberty quickly faded as Putin compared the white ribbons the protesters wore to condoms in a humorous remark designed to rally solidarity from the anti-liberals of Moscow.

Russia was also facing its own troubles. The Chechen affairs were still inflamed. The Beslan school seizure by Chechen separatists and the school liberation massacre authorised by Putin, in which over 300 people, mainly children, were murdered, happened only a couple of months before the Orange Revolution. Unlike Clinton's reaction to the 1993 Waco massacre, in which 41 adults and 25 children, followers of the doomsday prophet David Koresh, were killed, Putin seemed invigorated by the Beslan Siege.

Yet Putin was not a true dictator of the fanatical ilk. He liked money more, or at least as much, as he liked power, but he did not have an idea that trumped both money and power. And he, mercifully, did not write poetry, a sure sign of an ideas-driven dictator. Nothing like the lyrical verses of Stalin, the poetic prophecies of Mao, or the saccharine poetry of Mussolini emerged from underneath Putin's quill. Putin did what all money-oriented dictators do. He was classically past-oriented, proclaiming the collapse of the USSR as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century. The collapse of the USSR has attracted more explanations than the fall of Rome, most of them strangely similar with the exception of cooking in lead pots. If Soviet elites went crazy, it was not from lead poisoning. It was from the poisoning influence of the US dollar. Putin, appropriately editing out his failures and amplifying his triumphs along the way, decided that he was the Messiah who would restore the USSR, or, better still, Imperial Russia. He was not going to let Ukraine go. In 2013 Putin urged the outgoing president Leonid Kuchma to use force to disperse the protesters. Kuchma, partly worried about his foreign assets and partly mindful of Ceausescu's finale, replied to Putin, "You don't understand, Ukraine has become different.'[2] With that phrase, the path was cleared for Yushchenko to take the *bulava.*

[2] Quoted from an Interview with Andrey Illarionov, Putin's former economic advisor, in Ukrayinska Pravda, 2013.

VIKTOR YUSHCHENKO 2005-2010

Fig. 2-1

Born into a family of teachers in the north of Ukraine, less than 200 kilometres from Kuchma's birthplace, Yushchenko was educated in Galicia, graduating from Ternopil Finance and Economics Institute. Following a stint in the Soviet Army, Yushchenko worked as a village accountant in a collective farm, before making a wise move into banking. From there, his career was characterised by inexorable ascent, achieving a six-year plateau in 1993 when Yushchenko became the governor of Ukraine's Central Bank. He oversaw the successful launch of the hryvnia, Ukraine's first national currency in 1996. The hryvnia turned out to be a moderate success, but it was a decisive step away from the post-USSR financial anarchy. In 1999 Kuchma appointed the reluctant Yushchenko as the prime minister before sacking him in 2001, arguably as Yushchenko was becoming too popular – the Ukrainian economy started rising in 1999, for the first time since the collapse of the USSR. Yushchenko then reluctantly became one of the leaders of the opposition to Kuchma's ever-more authoritarian regime, before becoming the main pro-European candidate in the 2004 presidential elections. With his comely looks, young second wife from America, impeccable tailoring, and a certain quiet charm, Yushchenko became the symbol for the slim majority of Ukrainians who were tired of the Kuchma's decade, mired with corruption, a crackdown on the freedom of the press, and a killing of a prominent journalist critical of Kuchma.

Yuschenko was good-looking, to the extent that he weakened the knees. However, in a cruel twist of fate, his looks were robbed from him after an attempted poisoning, likely by a corrupt SBU officer with links to the FSB, turned his face purple and warty, and condemned him to a period of strong painkillers and a constant diamorphine pump. Yet the poisoning propelled him into the political stratosphere. He was unimaginably popular with women and he could charm men. He was the most inscrutable and discreet of all the Ukrainian presidents. Yushchenko was capable of quietly and coherently speaking about the economy for hours. No matter what he did or spoke about, his presence would always yank everyone's attention. Yushchenko was a majestic aristocratic salmon. His main opponent, Viktor Yanukovych, a proletarian eel.

As president, Yushchenko was hailed a hero; he made an amazing start with the pedal all the way to the metal. Yushchenko made more foreign visits in his only term than both of his predecessors altogether. He received a standing ovation at the US Congress, with congressmen and congresswomen chanting "Yu-shchen-ko! Yu-shchen-ko!". About three-quarters of his audience were wearing something orange. Ukraine seemed to be on the brink of the greatest breakthrough in its modern history. Foreign

investments flew in. Banks were providing cheap credits and there was an unprecedented consumption boom, the 2006-2007 credit growth averaging 73 percent. Old Soviet-style hotels, complete with sex workers, cockroaches and secret service agents, were being replaced by modern Western joints opening catering for foreign investors and the increasingly affluent locals. Even the old Soviet industry got a revamp. In 2005 Yushchenko reprivatised Kryvorizhstal, Ukraine's largest steel production plant, raising nearly five billion dollars. A year earlier the plant had been sold by Kuchma for a scandalous $800 million to his son-in-law. Ukrainians started warming up to the idea of joining the EU and even NATO. Anti-corruption laws enjoyed popular support. Even Ukrainian modern poets and writers became recognisable in the West, especially in Poland and the German-speaking countries.

But by 2008, things could not have been more different. Foreign investments dried out partly due to the global financial crisis but mostly due to the unreformed and corrupt judicial system that provided little protection for investors. Yushchenko was lambasting corrupt officials, but his reforms were half-hearted and episodic. He suspended traffic police on a whim, but he seemed to lack the determination to break the much more troublesome corruption in courts. Journalists would often ask him to honour his election slogan "Bandits will get prisons". Yushchenko would first say that it was not up to him to put people in prisons, then that his team was no good. Soon he appeared disinterested in the whole anti-corruption fight altogether and his entourage responded in kind. The initial alacrity and conviction gave way to despondency and frustration. Yushchenko made initial steps toward joining NATO. During the 2008 Bucharest summit, Yushchenko, supported by President Bush, presented a strong case for Ukraine and Georgia to join. This was opposed by France and Germany with Britain remaining on the fence. Putin claimed Ukraine was not a real country and should never be considered for joining NATO. Perhaps a slightly more active diplomatic effort by Yushchenko's cabinet could have made a difference to this astonishing short-sightedness of the West European strategic geniuses. In his interviews, Yushchenko claims that Angela Merkel's arguments in opposition to Ukraine's NATO aspirations came as a surprise. The lack of unanimity of the NATO members galvanised Putin into action. Later the same year he invaded Georgia, putting an end to its NATO prospects. In 2014 he did the same with Ukraine. The policy of Russian containment proposed by the American diplomat George Kennan as far back as 1946 seemed obsolete in 2008. It is probably as good as new now, with Russia and China emerging as the key rivals of the West, rather than morphing into responsible world leaders hellbent on ensuring global security.

Yushchenko's political appointments proved to be his ultimate downfall. In a three and a half hour interview with Dmytro Gordon, a renowned Ukrainian journalist, he said that the appointments of Yuriy Lutsenko as the Minister of Internal Affairs and Oleksandr Turchynov as the Director of the SBU were big mistakes. But his biggest mistake was the appointment of Yuliya Tymoshenko as his prime minister in preference to Petro Poroshenko, whom we will consider later in this book. Twice. Yushchenko's reasons were simple – Tymoshenko was very popular with the electorate and Yushchenko, like many weak leaders, was scared of making unpopular decisions. She seemed like the Amerigo Vespucci fully-rigged ship but turned out to be the Dmitry Donskoy nuclear submarine, leading to the destruction of the Orange team. Tymoshenko progressively disregarded Yushchenko in her decision-making which inevitably led to an open confrontation between the two. Her most toxic legacy is signing an unimaginably bad deal on Russian gas. Without seeking Yushchenko's authorisation, she went to Moscow, giggled with Putin over his invasion of Georgia, and signed a deal, according to which Ukraine agreed to pay double the 2008 price for Russian gas, to keep the gas transit fees low and even to pay penalties if not enough gas had been purchased. Yushchenko was incensed. Earlier in 2008 he had stopped gas talks with Putin, hoping to achieve the lowest possible price using Ukraine's trump card – its gas transportation system, without which very little gas could have been sold from Russia to Europe. Yushchenko was trying to bite Tymoshenko at every opportunity. He would critique her relationship with Putin in the same way he would her handling of the economy. He would use colourful Gogolesque language to speak of Tymoshenko saying inter alia that his prime minister had as many loans as a dog had fleas. Tymoshenko was biting back, saying she had no choice but to sign the gas deal, as it was Yushchenko's own stupidity and inflexibility that had left Ukraine with no gas. It proved an ill-fated coupling whose feuds led directly to Yanukovych being elected in 2010. Yet the Yanukovych years and the subsequent collapse of the Ukrainian state were not inevitable. If only Yushchenko and Tymoshenko had found a way of rubbing along, the events that followed might have been entirely different.

Yushchenko seemed to genuinely want to unite Ukraine, but instead of Abraham Lincoln, he turned out to be James Buchanan. He refused to challenge Yanukovych and appointed him the prime minister after dismissing Tymoshenko for the second time. Yushchenko seemed to have an interesting combination of poor leadership, being easily discouraged and trusting people he appointed to do their job properly without him needing to check in. In stark contrast, one might add, to the way his key adversary,

Mr Putin, behaved. Putin has always been suspicious and controlling, both traits accentuating rather than diminishing over time. In 2005, Putin was unprecedentedly popular in Russia. But even at the end of 2020, after 30 years in power, he was still more popular than Yushchenko at the end of his tenure. This, after Putin awarded himself and his two daughters perpetual immunity from prosecution; disregarded the Russian Constitution by allowing himself to rule until 2036, and persecuted all who showed any sign of disloyalty. It would appear that Putin's style is more popular with post-USSR populations. Despite years of international isolation, a stagnant economy and unimaginable corruption, Putin's approval ratings were significantly higher *even in Ukraine* than the meagre three percent Yushchenko commanded at the end of his term in office. The difference was also remarkable because, like the late Duke of Edinburgh, Yushchenko was never noticeably reticent about taking on subjects about which he knew nothing, unlike Putin, who has always struggled with words.

As his tenure progressed, it turned out that Yushchenko's main passions in life were history and archaeology, and, predictably for a Ukrainian, beekeeping. Yushchenko was a good historian with a broad, sweeping style that lent itself to telling interesting but long-winded stories. Towards the end of his tenure, Yushchenko became even more whimsical and unworldly and a bit of a digresser. Instead of focusing on the economy, he would speak quietly for hours about history. And beekeeping. He promoted the international recognition of the Holodomor, the 1932-1933 man-made famine in Ukraine, orchestrated by Stalin's regime, which killed millions. More than half of all countries that have recognised the Holodomor as a genocide of Ukrainians declared it during Yushchenko's rule. He also started the process of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church gaining independence from Moscow, a topic we will return to later on in the book. This too, like so many of his projects, remained incomplete. He yanked at people's heartstrings fiercely with stories of his family. His father, about 13 at the peak of the 1933 famine, stole the last piece of *salo* (lard often spiced with garlic) from his home and ran away leaving the rest of the family to starve. He was haunted by the theft all his life. Then there was the story of Yushchenko's second wife, an American by birth, who relinquished her American citizenship and refused to leave Ukraine no matter the hardship. And the fact that his children have always slept with him in his bed, despite his wife's strict discipline. Sweet. Amusing (overlooking the fact that one of his children, Andriy, seemed to have developed a liking for expensive cars and platinum mobile phones at the tender age of 19). His wife oversaw the construction of the Children's Hospital of the Future which, having raised over 100 million hryvnia in private donations, came to nothing.

Unlike, one might add, the industrial-scale rebuilding of dozens of objects of the Cossack heritage, which were mainly constructed on time and on budget. Yushchenko was a visionary who lacked the tenacity to implement his visions. In his rare contemporary interviews, sat amongst Trypillian cultural artefacts and homemade honey, Yushchenko often muses about his achievements, of which one is perhaps the most important – he did not fight for power and handed the reign to Yanukovych peacefully, supporting him over Tymoshenko in the 2010 presidential elections. Yushchenko's legacy is complex. It needs rescuing from the caricature his critics have created. Yushchenko's tenure was the best of times and it was the worst of times. All in one city.

VIKTOR YANUKOVYCH 2010-2014

Fig. 3-1