

Cornelius Granig: Yevhen Marchuk is the man who made a difference

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Yevhen Marchuk, former prime minister, defense minister, army general, and secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, holds a press briefing at the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center in Kyiv on March 27, 2016.

Photo by Courtesy

Many Ukrainian politicians stick to a certain cliché: They are typically male, dressed in expensive designer suits, and accompany themselves with bodyguards, young women and shady business figures. A young state servant, who later became a member in a post-EuroMaidan Revolution government, told me some years ago that his dream was to drive around in a convoy with “minimum” 10 cars and flashing blue lights, and the highway bridges would need to be closed for him to bypass the traffic jam. The plan included to later become an oligarch – a role model that includes the attributes of politicians and adds a lot of money that is taken away from the people in one of the poorest countries in Europe.

Yevhen Marchuk was a positive exception to this stereotype. He had nothing in common with corrupt politicians and their shady environment but was a charismatic statesman and humble servant for the Ukrainian people.

I remember a day in April 2018, when I met him in Vienna. He was waiting for me in the lobby of a middle-class hotel in the center of the city, smiling friendly to the people around him, accompanied by his friend General Ihor Smeshko, who is nowadays a promising presidential candidate in Ukraine and head of the Strength and Honor party. We were walking together to a meeting with Karl

Habsburg, the grandson of the last Austro-Hungarian emperor, an Austrian visionary who supports peacekeeping initiatives all over the world.

General Marchuk spoke about his vision for peace in Eastern Europe and the difficult situation in Ukraine. He was concerned about the development in the Trilateral Contact Group for the peaceful settlement of the situation in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, as he had expected much more progress in the discussions, in which he participated for several years. At this time the former Security Service of Ukraine general was already 77 years old, but still serving his country in the best possible way.

Born in 1941, he had been one of the first high-level officers that supported Ukrainian independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1991 he became the first head of the Security Service of Ukraine, the successor to the Soviet KGB. Afterwards, he was minister of defense. And, in 1995 for a year, he became prime minister. Later on, he served as a member of the Verkhovna Rada, as secretary of the National Security and Defence Council and he again became defense minister in 2003. He worked for Ukrainian presidents Leonid Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko and, in 2015, President Petro Poroshenko appointed him as special envoy to represent Ukraine for the peace dialogue meetings in Minsk.

When we were crossing Vienna with General Marchuk on this sunny day in April 2018, he was already suffering from such health problems that we could not walk very fast. He commented on these circumstances with a smile: "Like in the peace dialogue, sometimes it is difficult even to move by small steps forward. But it is still important to move, as sooner or later you will reach your target," he said to me and General Smeshko.

When we brought him back to the hotel in the evening, he was happy to see his wife Larissa again, as if they had just fallen in love yesterday. He insisted on drinking a glass of wine to celebrate the excellent day and left us with a smile on his face.

I will always remember Yevhen Marchuk with his kind and humble attitude, his sharp mind, and great vision, and I am saying farewell, dear friend. You really made a difference!

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