

Ukraine: Constitutional crisis deepens as Orange parties jostle for power

By Niall Green
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A coalition of the Party of the Regions, the Communists and the Socialists—which together hold a majority of seats in the Ukrainian parliament (Rada)—continues to be prevented from forming a government by the leaders of the “Orange Revolution,” President Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko.

The Party of the Regions won the March elections to the Rada with 32 percent of the vote. Tymoshenko’s eponymous political party came second with 22 percent, followed by Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine trailing a distant third.

According to the constitution, Yushchenko had until midnight July 24 to approve or reject Party of the Region’s leader Viktor Yanukovich as the country’s prime minister. The deadline passed with Yushchenko insisting he has until August 2 to decide if he will endorse the new government or call fresh elections to the Rada.

Presidential loyalist and former prime minister Yuri Yekhanurov has been re-appointed head of an interim government.

Our Ukraine could join with the Party of the Regions in a “grand coalition.” Roman Zvarych, a spokesman for Our Ukraine, indicated that if the pro-Russian Party of the Regions was willing to adapt to Yushchenko’s more pro-Western agenda, then the two parties could form a government. “We are ready for cooperation on condition the country continues its domestic and foreign policy line,” Zvarych said.

Ukraine should continue working to join the World Trade Organisation by the end of 2006 and the European Union, as well as maintaining close ties with NATO and eventually joining the alliance, he explained. This amounts to a diktat that any deal between them would be predicated on the Party of the Region’s adopting the policies of a party decisively

rejected in the polls.

The formation of any government led by Yanukovich—the defeated presidential candidate in 2004—has been strongly opposed by Tymoshenko, who has demanded the post of prime minister for herself.

In a move intended to prevent the Yanukovich-led coalition from taking office, Tymoshenko’s party resigned from the Rada on July 24. If they are joined by 26 deputies from Our Ukraine’s faction, then the Rada will lack the two-thirds quorum necessary to function, forcing fresh elections. The move was also designed to place maximum pressure on Yushchenko in a so-far unsuccessful bid to force him to use his presidential powers to reject Yanukovich as premier.

For Tymoshenko, a multimillionaire oligarch whose fortune was made in the privatised gas supply market in the 1990s, failure to gain power at the expense of the Party of the Regions would be a political and personal disaster. A Party of the Regions-led government would be likely to push for her prosecution for numerous alleged criminal practices in business and politics.

Caught between these factions, Yushchenko has faced a political “Catch 22” since the results of March’s election left his party in a dismal third place. Most Ukrainian commentators have predicted that if Yushchenko responds to the demand of Tymoshenko and calls fresh elections, Our Ukraine’s share of the vote will collapse, from 14 percent in March to as little as 9 or 10 percent, with many of its remaining supporters switching their vote to either the Party of the Regions or the Bloc Yulia Tymoshenko. Alternatively, if the president backs the formation of a government led by Yanukovich, then he will be portrayed by Tymoshenko as having “betrayed” the Orange Revolution.

Most crucially, should Yushchenko allow the

pro-Russian Party of the Regions to take office, he will lose the backing of his principal supporter, the United States.

The Orange Revolution, hailed in the Western media as a victory for Ukraine's "democratic forces," was little more than a political coup organised and funded by the US and other Western powers to bring to power a section of the country's elite that were amenable to Washington's aim of weakening the influence of Russia in all the territories of the former Soviet Union.

Yushchenko's acceptance of a Yanukovich government would be unacceptable to Washington, which has now identified Tymoshenko as the key figure to press ahead with its strategy for Ukraine.

There is as yet no direct evidence that her decision to quit parliament was approved by the Bush administration. But Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, fierce opponents since the president sacked her from the post of prime minister in 2005, only agreed to share power as a result of pressure from the US to form a Tymoshenko-led government that would keep the Party of the Regions out of power.

The debacle in Ukraine has proven to be a major embarrassment for US foreign policy. In the struggle between Washington and Moscow, the Orange Revolution was seen as a major blow to Russian influence in a region rich in oil and gas deposits and energy transit routes. Less than two years later, Washington's plans for the Ukraine are in disarray.

US and European media outlets, so effusive in their praise for the Orange Revolution in 2004, are almost silent on the crisis in Ukraine today. Writing in the *Financial Times*, Anatol Lieven, senior research fellow at the New America Foundation, commented that current events "have been barely reported by most of the US media, let alone commented on. This silence marks a response to ideological and geopolitical embarrassment of which the old Soviet media might have been proud."

Despite the silence, Washington is already preparing to disrupt any new pro-Russian government in Kiev. The *Stratfor* web site, highly connected in US foreign policy and security circles, wrote on July 24 that Tymoshenko's task will be to mobilise her supporters "against a hostile government, whether one emerges immediately or after a new election."

The article continues: "Though [Tymoshenko's]

supporters are highly motivated and often young, they are concentrated in western Ukraine and Kiev. She enjoys almost no support in the heavily pro-Russia east. Should she find herself isolated entirely from government, however, she might have no other option but to attempt the large-scale undermining of Ukraine's political system through public demonstrations, blockades, work stoppages or extra-constitutional maneuvers."

There could not be a more frank description of the fundamentally undemocratic character of Tymoshenko and, by extension, of the Orange Revolution sponsored and organised by the US.

Stratfor concludes that her actions would not be driven by "resetting Ukraine on a course toward Europe, nor about gaining concessions on energy or economic policy. It is a matter of personal ambition. Having lost the office of prime minister, she will not rest (or allow her followers to rest) until she is back at the top."

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