

## Ukraine: free elections, kamikaze president

**Taras Kuzio**

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*An "orange coalition" is still the most likely outcome of a Ukrainian election won by the revolution's opponent, says Taras Kuzio.*

Ukraine held its fourth parliamentary elections on 26 March in an atmosphere totally different to earlier elections. President Viktor Yushchenko can be credited with ensuring that it has been Ukraine's first free and fair poll since the country became an independent state in January 1992. The democratic breakthrough initiated by the orange revolution of November 2004-January 2005 has been consolidated.

This is in stark contrast to neighbouring Belarus, where the elections held on 19 March confirmed that Alexander Lukashenko's regime is indeed the last dictatorship in Europe. Russia recognised the Belarusian election results and the European Union, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United States rejected them. In the case of Ukraine, the opposite happened: Russia called the elections "unfair" while the EU, OSCE and US described them in glowing and positive terms.

Voting patterns in the 2006 elections have not dramatically changed from those in the three rounds of the 2004 elections. Then, and now, the west and centre was "pro-orange" while the east and south is "pro-blue" (with Viktor Yanukovich and the Party of Regions the strongest forces).

There are though, two crucial differences. First, Yanukovich's 44% vote on 26 December 2004 was not repeated in the 2006 election. With 60% of votes counted at the time of writing, his Party of Regions has only 28.8% (less than exit polls predictions of 31%).

Second, the turnout across Ukraine is generally far lower in the 2006 elections than in 2004. Traditionally, eastern Ukraine has a lower turnout than western Ukraine and this remains the case in 2006. The relentlessly negative election campaign of the Party of Regions also worked against a high turnout.

The elections were a crushing defeat for the communists, who were last in the list of political forces managing to pass the 3% minimum-vote threshold and enter parliament. Their decline from 120 seats in 1998 to twenty in 2006 has been precipitous. Two of Ukraine's regional clans failed to enter parliament: *Ne Tak!* (Not Like This!) headed by the Kyiv (Kiev) clan's Social Democratic United Party, and Labour Ukraine, the Dnipropetrovsk clan. The camp of former president, Leonid Kuchma, voted for the Party of Regions.

### The post-election dance

There was never any doubt that only five or six political forces would be able to qualify for seats in parliament, even with such a comparatively low threshold. Of these forces, three would be the "big players" – Party of Regions, Our Ukraine and the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc. Any parliamentary coalition will have to be created from two of these. As Yushchenko is the honorary chairman of Our Ukraine, his bloc will inevitably be one of the two coalition partners.

The likely election coalitions are in principle, therefore, twofold: Our Ukraine plus Tymoshenko, or Our Ukraine plus Party of Regions. Ukraine's new parliamentary coalition, which will create a government and nominate a prime minister, will most likely be a revived orange team of Our Ukraine plus Tymoshenko plus the Socialists (SPU). Tymoshenko has energetically campaigned for an orange coalition and has warned against the dangers of any alliance with Yanukovych.

Two factors explain why an orange coalition will happen. First, an alliance with the Party of Regions would be political suicide for Yushchenko. It would be seen as a "betrayal" of the orange revolution and Yushchenko's support would collapse. Our Ukraine's popularity support slumped after it signed a strategically futile memorandum with the regions of Ukraine in late September 2005, a memorandum that Yushchenko himself discarded in January 2006.

Yanukovych is not a reformed leader, and his Party of Regions followed the communists in sending greetings to Lukashenko on his "victory" (Yushchenko and Ukraine's foreign ministry shared the western position of refusing to recognise the official Belarus result). Yanukovych has never acknowledged his defeat in 2004 and he still believes he won the election but was then "betrayed" by then-president Leonid Kuchma. Throughout the 2006 elections, the Party of Regions continued to denounce the legitimacy of the orange revolution as an "illegal coup" and continued to denigrate its supporters as "orange rats".

The Party of Regions is in favour of economic reform because it is dominated by oligarchs and businessmen. Yet, it voted against World Trade Organisation legislation in 2005. The Party of Regions opposes Nato membership, favours full membership in the post-Soviet Common (or Single) Economic Space, and supports the elevation of Russian to a second state language.

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Second, such an alliance would send the wrong signal to the European Union and Nato that the orange revolution is in retreat. The EU is already passive in its attitudes towards Ukraine and an alliance with the Party of Regions would give sustenance to those inside the EU who do not want Ukraine inside. An alliance with a political force hostile to Nato membership would also lead to a postponement of Nato offering Ukraine a membership action plan at its Riga summit in November 2006.

Tymoshenko's second place, after quadrupling the number of seats she won in the 2002 elections, puts her in a powerful position. Our Ukraine, in contrast has fewer seats than in 2002 and is running a poor third.

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Why has Our Ukraine fared badly when its honorary chairman is Ukraine's president, swept into office by people power? The answer is that Yushchenko is a "kamikaze" president. He made countless mistakes in 2005, including sacking the Tymoshenko government and dividing the orange camp, signing a memorandum with Yanukovych, mishandled the gas contract with Russia in a non-transparent manner,

and kept prosecutor Svyatoslav Piskun until October, thereby not following through on instituting charges against high-level officials. Yushchenko also wasted a year when he inherited Kuchma's extensive executive powers, failing to use them to stamp his authority on the country.

Yushchenko's "kamikaze" mistakes led to an orange protest vote which benefited Tymoshenko rather than the party of the youth movement that played a prominent role in the 2004 events, Pora – Reform and Civic Order. Our Ukraine proved to be arrogant, vis-à-vis both orange voters and Yushchenko himself. Senior orange businessmen accused of corruption in September 2005 refused to back down from standing in Our Ukraine, ignoring Yushchenko's advice. Meanwhile, political parties in Our Ukraine refused to merge into a single pro-presidential party.

Yushchenko failed to understand perhaps the most important factor driving the orange revolution – the widespread feelings of injustice against abuse of office, corruption and the "bandits" running Ukraine. Yuri Yekhanurov, the prime minister appointed in September after Yushchenko sacked his cabinet, totally misunderstood this feeling, as seen by his invitation to Ukraine's oligarchs to a meeting in October where he described them as "Ukraine's national bourgeoisie".

The rule of law cannot move ahead in Ukraine without dealing with these issues from the past – election fraud in 2004, corruption at senior levels, the identity of those who ordered the Georgii Gongadze murder and the attempted assassination (by poisoning) of Yushchenko.

Tymoshenko will become prime minister or parliamentary speaker. Much of what Yushchenko/Our Ukraine have taken credit for economically was initiated under her government. This time, foreign

investors' fears about property rights will have to be assuaged. But the free 2006 elections, followed by an orange coalition, will combine to show the consolidation of Ukraine's democratic progress after the orange revolution. It is doubtful though that Ukraine's parliament will last its full term of five years. The contradictions inherent in the Party of Regions between businessmen and pro-Russian, ex-communist voters will lead it to implode. Then, Ukraine's citizens will have to do it all over again.

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