



Ukraine's Free Elections & Kamikaze President
Taras Kuzio

Visiting Professor, Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University

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 these elections were Ukraine's first free and fair elections since it became an independent state in January 1992. The democratic breakthrough initiated by the Orange Revolution of late 2004 is being consolidated.

In stark contrast to neighboring Belarus, the elections held there a week earlier proved that the Alyaksandr Lukashenka regime is the last dictatorship in Europe. Russia recognized the Belarusian election results and the EU, OSCE and US rejected them. In the case of Ukraine, the opposite happened: Russia called the elections "unfair" while the EU, OSCE and US described them as having been held in a "free and fair" manner.

Voting patterns in the 2006 elections have not dramatically changed from those in the repeat second round of the presidential elections on December 26, 2004. Then, and now, the west and center was pro-Orange while the east and south is pro-blue (Viktor Yanukovich and the Party of Regions). The Orange coalition (Our Ukraine+ Tymoshenko+ Socialists) received 45 percent of the vote, which translates into roughly 56 percent of seats (in 2004 Yushchenko obtained 52). The Party of Regions and Communists received 35 percent of the vote, which translates into approximately 44 percent of seats (in 2004 Yanukovich obtained 44).

There are though, two crucial differences between the 2004 and 2006 elections. First, Yanukovich's 44 percent vote on 26 December 2004 is not repeated in the 2006 election. The Party of Regions won only 31 percent.

Second, there is a generally lower turnout across Ukraine compared to the 2004 elections. Traditionally, eastern Ukraine has a lower turnout than western Ukraine and this is repeated in 2006. Another factor working against a high turnout for the Party of Regions is its highly negative election campaign. The Party of Regions offered little positive except better economic management and a claim that it could work better with Russia (for example, over gas).

The elections were a crushing defeat for the Communists who came bottom of the political forces who entered parliament. Their decline from 120 seats in 1998 to 15-20 in 2006 is meteoric. As a political force the Communists are finished.

Two of Ukraine's regional clans also failed to enter parliament: Ne Tak! (Not Like This!) headed by Viktor Medvedchuk's Kyiv clan's Social Democratic United Party, and Labor Ukraine, the Dnipropetrovsk clan. The former Kuchma camp, which traditionally drew its main voting strength in eastern and southern Ukraine, voted for the Party of Regions and not for Volodymyr Lytvyn's bloc (the former Agrarian Party). This vote showed that Ukraine had entered the post-Kuchma era, as Lytvyn's bloc was the most closely associated with that era. Yanukovich has never forgiven

Kuchma and Medvedchuk for having "betrayed" him in November 2004.

There was never any doubt that only 5-6 political forces would enter parliament, even though the threshold is very low at only 3 percent (the European norm is 5). Of these forces, three would be the "big players" - Party of Regions, Our Ukraine bloc and the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc. Any parliamentary coalition would have to be created from two of these. As President Yushchenko is the Honorary Chairman of Our Ukraine, his bloc would inevitably be one of the two coalition partners.

The likely election coalitions were therefore two fold: Our Ukraine + Tymoshenko or Our Ukraine + Party of Regions. Ukraine's new parliamentary coalition, which will create a government and Prime Minister, will most likely be a revived Orange team of Our Ukraine + Tymoshenko + the Socialists (SPU).

Most of the credit for a revived Orange coalition has to go to Tymoshenko who has energetically campaigned for an Orange coalition and has warned against the dangers of any alliance with Yanukovich. Our Ukraine always held out the option of doing a deal with the Party of Regions. Businessmen in Our Ukraine and oligarchs in the Party of Regions certainly wanted to create a "Grand Coalition".

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 Party of Regions in late September 2005, a memorandum that Yushchenko himself discarded in January. Yushchenko did not receive additional voters in eastern Ukraine in gratitude for this memorandum.

Yanukovich is not a reformed leader and his Party of Regions followed the Communists in sending greetings to Alyaksandr Lukashenko on his "victory" in the flawed Belarusian presidential elections (Yushchenko and the Ministry Foreign Affairs followed the Western position on refusing to recognize the Belarus elections). Yanukovich has never acknowledged his defeat in 2004 and he still believes he won the election but was "betrayed" by then President Kuchma. Throughout the 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 favor of economic reform because it is dominated by oligarchs and businessmen. Yet, it voted against WTO legislation in 2005 as a protest vote against Yushchenko. The Party of Regions is opposed to NATO membership, in favor of full membership in the CIS Single Economic Space, and supports the elevation of Russian to a second state language. These three positions make it difficult for Our Ukraine to agree on a "Grand Coalition" with the Party of Regions.

Second, such an alliance would send the wrong signal to the EU and NATO that the Orange Revolution was 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 to join the membership queue. 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 November Riga summit.

Tymoshenko is in a powerful position because she is running second, quadrupling the number of her seats compared to the 2002 elections. Our Ukraine, in contrast, is running a poor third with 40 fewer seats than in 2002.

Why has Our Ukraine fared badly when its Honorary Chairman is Ukraine's President, swept into office by people power?

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, and mishandled the gas contract in a non-transparent manner. Yushchenko also was never sincere in his pledge to put "bandits in prison" as he kept Prosecutor Svyatoslav Piskun until October, thereby not following through on instituting charges against high level officials. Yushchenko also wasted 2005 when he inherited Kuchma's extensive executive powers, failing to use them to stamp his authority on the country. Yushchenko spent far too much time abroad in 2005.

Tymoshenko came in second because of Yushchenko's "kamikaze" mistakes that led to an Orange protest vote going to her, rather than to the Pora-Reforms and Order bloc or the Yuriy Kostenko-Ivan Pliushch bloc. Our Ukraine proved to be arrogant, both vis-a-vis Orange voters and vis-a-vis Yushchenko himself. Senior Orange businessmen accused of corruption in September refused to back down from standing in Our Ukraine, ignoring Yushchenko's advice. Meanwhile, political parties in Our Ukraine, such as Rukh, refused to merge into a single pro-presidential party, the People's Union - Our Ukraine, or created a separate election bloc (i.e. Kostenko's Ukrainian People's Party, the other successor to Rukh).

Yushchenko failed to understand perhaps the most important factor that drove the Orange Revolution - the widespread feelings of injustice against abuse of office, corruption and "Bandits" running Ukraine. Prime Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov 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, high level corruption, who ordered the Heorhiy Gongadze murder and Yushchenko's assassination. None of these four issues has been adequately dealt with.

Tymoshenko will become Prime Minister or parliamentary speaker. Much of what Yushchenko/Our Ukraine have taken credit for economically was initiated under her government. Foreign investors fears about property rights will have to be assuaged.

The holding of free 2006 elections and a resultant Orange coalition shows the consolidation of Ukraine's democratic progress after the Orange Revolution.

At the same time, it is doubtful that Ukraine's parliament will last its full term of five years. The contradictions inherent inside parliament's largest faction, Party of Regions, between businessmen and pro-Russian, former Communist voters will lead it to implode. The Orange coalition is also divided by policy differences. The Socialists are opposed to WTO and NATO membership and economic reform (although good on rooting out corruption and promoting democratization).

It is also difficult to see how governments will stay in place for the full term of parliament. Democratic progress may be therefore accompanied by short term instability.