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The Non-Listening President

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The author argues that one of the most surprising aspects of the Viktor Yushchenko administration has been its unwillingness, or disinterest, in public relations and public opinion, whether in Ukraine or abroad. The Yushchenko administration and Our Ukraine ignored public opinion in Ukraine among Orange Revolution supporters, and that of the USA and the West in general, thereby going against the promises made by Yushchenko during the Orange Revolution

One of the most surprising aspects of the Viktor Yushchenko administration has been its unwillingness, or disinterest, in public relations and public opinion, whether in Ukraine or abroad. The Yushchenko administration and Our Ukraine ignored public opinion in Ukraine among Orange Revolution supporters, and that of the USA and the West in general, which called for a revived Orange coalition following the March elections. A coalition was only put together on the eve of the June deadline but it immediately collapsed and led to the current political crisis.

In ignoring domestic and foreign public opinion and advice, the Yushchenko administration has boxed itself into a corner. The two choices facing President Yushchenko are both unpalatable; proposing Viktor Yanukovich as Prime Minister or dissolving parliament and holding new elections. The first would be to make Yushchenko a lame duck president and the second would make Our Ukraine a lame duck political force.

The Orange Revolution did not have to develop this way if the president and Our Ukraine had upheld one of the central ideals of the Maidan. When Ukrainians went on to the streets in the Orange Revolution they sought to change their relationship with their rulers.

The post-Soviet relationship had continued the Soviet approach of the 'new class' living in a different world to its 'subjects'. The Orange Revolution was a call for the ruling elites to treat its 'subjects' as citizens; that is, to move this relationship from Eurasian to European norms. Remember the Orange Revolution anthem 'We are not bydlo (scum)! We are the sons and daughters of Ukraine!'

A central component was to be that the ruling elites would listen and act in line with public opinion. But Yushchenko has failed to become a listening president.

Orange Revolution supporters were never told why the 'bandits' (commonly understood as former President Leonid Kuchma and his senior officials) never met

any justice and are in parliament today heading key committees? When the newly free media asked awkward questions, such as why Roman Zvarych could be Justice Minister without legal training and after falsifying his CV or questions regarding the president's son, they were told to stop asking them or were condemned.

President Yushchenko never explained why he had to remove the Yulia Tymoshenko government, after saying three weeks earlier that it was the 'best government in Europe'. Similarly, Prime Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov never explained why the bad oligarchs had suddenly become 'good national bourgeoisie'?

Every poll that followed the March elections showed that an overwhelming majority of Orange Revolution voters in Our Ukraine, the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc and the Socialists wanted to see a revived Orange coalition. Yet, Our Ukraine and President Yushchenko took credit for holding Ukraine's first free election while, on the other hand, ignored the fact that Our Ukraine had come third.

Ukrainians also flocked to the Orange Revolution because they believed that Yushchenko, and other Orange leaders, were different. The September 2005 crisis, drawn out coalition negotiations following the 2006 elections and the July crisis have proven to many Ukrainians that this Maidan assumption was wrong.

Our Ukraine and Socialist politicians have not proved they are different to those under Leonid Kuchma. Only the Tymoshenko bloc has stuck to its stance of refusing to talk with Yanukovich.

If Our Ukraine had come first in the Orange camp in the 2006 elections, as they expected, there would have been an Orange coalition established in April, with Yekhanurov as premier. The only reason for the drawn out talks, and ignoring of Orange opinion, was President Yushchenko's and Our Ukraine's dislike for Tymoshenko, who had a right to claim the post as her bloc had come first in the Orange camp.

Instead of listening to Orange voters, Our Ukraine (presumably with the president's knowledge) negotiated simultaneously with its Orange partners and the Party of Regions. This dual-track duplicity, coupled with the drawn out talks, only served to reinforce the view that the Orange camp was hopelessly divided.

In the foreign arena, the Yushchenko administration has also ignored public opinion and public relations. This is surprising as during the 2004 elections the Yushchenko camp had by far the best public relations exercise in the West.

The 'pro-Western' President Yushchenko and Our Ukraine ignored US and NATO advice following the March elections, which linked a revived Orange coalition to a NATO Membership Action Plan and NATO membership (without supporting any particular candidate for Prime Minister).

The only conclusion one can make is that personal animosity towards Tymoshenko became a more important policy than listening to Ukraine's best Western friends. And this animosity became more important than NATO membership, which now seems more illusory with the anti-crisis coalition.

Since the election of Yushchenko his administration has largely ignored the formation of Western opinion. No PR firms have been hired in the West by his administration or Our Ukraine.

The only explanation is the arrogance that power brings coupled with a misplaced view that there was no need to shape Western opinion because it was pro-Orange anyway. This has led to numerous public relations mistakes when President Yushchenko and his chief of staff, Oleh Rybachuk, have appeared in Western television interviews.

Presidential secretariat staffers explained to this author how they had briefed Mr. Rybachuk for his BBC Hardtalk interview. This advice and briefing was subsequently ignored, leading to what everybody acknowledges was a lost opportunity and PR disaster.

Compare this with Mr. Yanukovych. During the 2004 elections his government hired a Washington, DC public affairs company but its advice was largely ignored and Mr. Yanukovych relied upon Russian political technologists.

During the 2006 elections, he hired a new American public relations firm that has been to some degree been successful in re-shaping his image, and that of his top lieutenants. It is ironic that the Party of Regions is the only political party using US public relations advisers, while President Yushchenko/Our Ukraine and the Tymoshenko bloc have ignored this issue.

The return of Yanukovych as prime minister would be proof of Yushchenko's failure to implement the core values of the Orange Revolution in becoming a listening president. He should have implemented what he promised on the Maidan.

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