

TRANSITIONS ONLINE:



Yushchenko: **Constructing an Opposition**
by [Taras Kuzio](#)

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As fickle as the recent moves of Yushchenko and his party may look, they highlight Our Ukraine's deep-seated motivations.

The Ukrainian parliamentary elections in March were the freest in the country's history and one of the most free and fair polls yet held in the Commonwealth of Independent States. But this milestone in Ukrainian history was overshadowed by a four-month parliamentary and political crisis that was overcome only at the beginning of August with the signing of a deal that saw President Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine party enter a "National Unity" coalition with the top vote-getter, the Party of Regions, headed by defeated presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich. The Socialist Party is also part of the new coalition, and the political bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko, Our Ukraine's Orange Revolution partner, goes into opposition.

Our Ukraine's maneuvers saw Yushchenko approving the candidacy for prime minister of the man conventionally dubbed his arch-rival. The real rivalry, however, is not Yushchenko against Yanukovich; it is the personal and ideological divide between Yushchenko's party and the person and political movement of the woman who stood at his side during the Orange Revolution.

Yushchenko and Our Ukraine did not expect to win the elections. Surveys clearly put Yanukovich's Party of Regions in the lead. But they never expected to finish a distant third behind both Regions and the electoral bloc headed by Tymoshenko, Yushchenko's Orange Revolution comrade, first prime minister, and now rival to both him and Yanukovich. After the voting, a leading figure in Our Ukraine, Roman Bessmertny, told the *Stolychnyi Novosti* newspaper, "The elections have taken place and we should respect their results." Instead, the president and his stunned supporters refused to adhere to the informal agreement among the "orange" forces that whichever political grouping in their camp won the most votes – Yushchenko's or Tymoshenko's – would have the right to nominate the next prime minister.

Our Ukraine's unwillingness to accept the election outcome led directly to four months of political and constitutional deadlock. And the party's solution to the dilemma was to go into "opposition" while placing some of its leading figures into the National Unity coalition government: a "semi-pregnant" position, as the leading weekly *Zerkalo Tyzhnia* described it. Such a move will not fool orange voters. Yet the party's decision to adopt an awkward straddle between the opposition and government did not arise from short-term political considerations alone, for the party has never been a true opposition force.

OUR UKRAINE'S TWO-FRONT STRATEGY

When they realized how badly the elections had turned out for them, Yushchenko and Our Ukraine made a decision that set the course for stalemate. Instead of living with the outcome of the voting and putting forward Tymoshenko for the premiership, they began simultaneous talks with the Tymoshenko bloc and the Party of Regions. In its talks with Tymoshenko's people, Our Ukraine sought to prevent her from returning to the premiership, or failing that, to win the post of parliamentary speaker for Our Ukraine's candidate, Petro Poroshenko, a major figure in or near the party since its founding in 2001. Personal animosity between Poroshenko and Tymoshenko plagued the first year of the Yushchenko administration, and many observers felt that the placing of the two rivals in high office would up the odds of a quick government collapse.

Our Ukraine switched roles when talking with Yanukovich's side, agreeing to a deal to retain Prime Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov in office while Regions would be allowed to control the speakership. This would not have been too bitter a pill for Regions to swallow, as they saw Yekhanurov as someone they could work with, above all, someone opposed to further "reprivatizations" of one-time state assets that had fallen into the hands of the wealthy businessmen who are Regions' major patrons.

Though Our Ukraine had come in third in the voting, the party believed that having the president's backing would compensate for its election failure and allow it to hang on as the dominant political force.

The Socialists' defection from the orange camp in July and the formation of the "anti-crisis coalition" comprising the Party of Regions, Socialists, and Communists, without Our Ukraine, undermined this strategy and moved the crisis into a new phase that resolved itself only with the formation of the "National Unity" coalition.

The creation of this coalition in early August marks a return to the political landscape of the early 1990s after Ukraine became an independent state. The country's first president, Leonid Kravchuk, sought to align himself with the so-called national democrats – center-right parties, such as Rukh, who favored building a strong state ahead of reform – to support his statist policies in the face of internal and external threats. National democrats divided over their attitudes toward cooperating with Kravchuk. Rukh underwent a split, one wing going into opposition while hewing to the president's overall policies – a stance known in Ukrainian political jargon as "constructive" or "loyal" opposition – while another wing fully aligned itself with the president. Our Ukraine's split this summer came about in a similar manner, with one "constructive opposition" wing against cooperation with Yanukovich and another faction willing to join a Yanukovich-led government. The party's deep division showed clearly in the parliamentary vote on Yanukovich's candidacy for the premiership on 4 August, when only 30 of Our Ukraine's 80 deputies voted for him.

Today, as in the early 1990s, those in Our Ukraine, such as Yushchenko, who countenance cooperation with Yanukovich do so believing that national democrats and "centrists" need to work together to unite Ukraine, bringing together the western and central areas where the national democrat power base lies with the eastern and southern strongholds of the business-oriented, typically Russophone "centrists."

LOYALTY TEST

Our Ukraine was established after parliament removed Prime Minister Yushchenko from office in 2001. The aim was to unite national-democratic and liberal parties against the growing authoritarianism of President Leonid Kuchma's administration. Yet Kuchma did not see Our Ukraine as a threat, because its leaders – including Poroshenko, who brought another "loyal opposition" party, Solidarity, and enticed business interests into Our Ukraine's fold; Yushchenko; and former parliamentary speaker Ivan Pliushch – made clear they were not like the true opposition represented by Tymoshenko's party and the Socialists. Our Ukraine sought out a niche between pro-regime and anti-regime parties.

National democratic forces in Ukraine have never been comfortable oppositionists. Their qualms in the early days over taking overly critical stances against the presidential administration can be partially understood by looking at the political tensions of the day. Under Kravchuk and during Kuchma's first term, the new state was threatened by internal and external threats from the Communist Party and Russia respectively, which refused to accept Ukraine's sovereignty or borders. The strategic priority for national democrats was state and nation building; that is, they were first and foremost statisticians rather than reformers, as the 1992 split of Rukh into "constructive oppositionists" and strong supporters of Kravchuk's state-building policies shows.

These two poles of the national-democrat camp have always ruled out a position of real opposition. Not until the "Kuchmagate" affair of 2000–2001 would Ukraine see its first true opposition movement, embodied in Tymoshenko's supporters and the Socialists.

RELUCTANT REBEL

The emergence of Tymoshenko as a leader of the protests against Kuchma over his alleged involvement in the murder of journalist Georgy Gongadze deepened the split in the national-democrat camp between mild oppositionists and those willing to cooperate with the authorities. Her bloc, which entered the 2002 elections as the National Salvation Front, attracted some radical national democrats and liberals who opposed any cooperation with pro-Kuchma centrists, but most national democrats joined Our Ukraine and backed away from Tymoshenko's and the Socialists' calls for Kuchma's impeachment.

Our Ukraine and dismissed premier Yushchenko did not condemn Kuchma or call for his removal from power. Instead, they merely called for the removal of the heads of law enforcement bodies involved in the Gongadze investigation, a sacrifice that Kuchma accepted. When Yushchenko took over Kuchma's office, although free from any allegations of personal involvement in the journalist's murder, he, too, shied away from a thorough investigation of the affair, even after the 2005 shooting death (officially by suicide) of former Interior Minister Yuri Kravchenko, one of the officials reportedly mixed up in Gongadze's death.

During the 2004 presidential campaign, the violence committed against Yushchenko

and his supporters, coupled with the level of fraud undertaken by the authorities, temporarily changed Our Ukraine's constructive opposition to open protest against Kuchma. He was no street activist, unlike Tymoshenko, but Yushchenko had little choice than to prepare for a revolution after his poisoning and the mass fraud in the runoff vote against Yanukovych, which convinced him that the authorities would never allow him to win.

Yushchenko's transformation into temporary revolutionary did not convert him into a true oppositionist, and the division between Our Ukraine and the forces led by Tymoshenko and the Socialists was only set aside during the Orange Revolution. The division has dominated the Yushchenko administration, leading to the dismissal of the Tymoshenko government in September 2005 and bitter recriminations ever since. This spilled over following the 2006 elections in Yushchenko and Our Ukraine seeking not to permit the return of Tymoshenko as prime minister.

Our Ukraine's inability to become an opposition force showed through again in its reaction to the formation of the National Unity coalition. The Socialists' abandonment of the orange coalition for the Party of Regions sent Our Ukraine reeling, and the party's tactics have continued to remain confused. One part of Our Ukraine has stated its readiness to go into "constructive opposition" to the new Yanukovych government while another is eager to join forces with him. Meanwhile, neither of these wings of Our Ukraine is willing to go into true opposition alongside Tymoshenko's party.

OUR UKRAINE REDUX

The Our Ukraine bloc that won the 2002 elections under Kuchma is very different from the Our Ukraine that lost the 2006 elections under Yushchenko.

Our Ukraine–2002 was a far broader coalition of liberal and national democratic parties. Our Ukraine–2006 is more centrist and pro-business, comprising parties such as the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, which supported Kuchma in the 2002 elections, defected to Yushchenko's camp only in the second round of the 2004 presidential election, and joined Our Ukraine–2006. Other democratic groups that had joined up with Our Ukraine in 2002, such as the Reforms and Order Party and the civil-society organization Pora, backed away from Yushchenko in 2006 and failed to win any seats in parliament.

The more centrist and pro-business Our Ukraine became the more it grew estranged from the Tymoshenko bloc and the closer it moved toward the Party of Regions. Yushchenko has always been more threatened by Tymoshenko, personally and ideologically, than by Yanukovych.

One of the paradoxes of the Yushchenko administration has been his dispensing with allies who assisted his rise to power. The presence of Pora and Reforms and Order in the Our Ukraine camp for this spring's elections would undoubtedly have helped the party attract more than a measly 14 percent of the vote and would have helped Yushchenko build a stronger support base in parliament from which to challenge more effectively the rebounding Party of Regions during the spring and summer negotiations. True to form, Yushchenko has seemingly preferred to team up with the former authorities than with the opposition.

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