

## Groundhog Day Politics

The pro-presidential Our Ukraine bloc continues to display indecision, mudslinging and infighting in its attempts to decide whether to join the ruling parliamentary coalition or go into opposition. Observing Our Ukraine's disastrous lack of tactics since the March 2006 elections, I have reached the conclusion that Ukraine resembles the mythical town in the 1993 American film "Groundhog Day." In "Groundhog Day," the comedian actor Bill Murray plays Phil Collins, an arrogant, self-centered and cynical television cameraman sent to the Pennsylvania town of Punxsutawney to cover the groundhog ceremony held annually in February. Groundhogs are checked to see if they are still in winter hibernation. If so, the prediction is that winter is still not over.

During the course of covering Groundhog Day for his television station, Collins stumbles into a time warp and each day is the same. A winter blizzard strands him in Punxsutawney.

Ukraine is like Groundhog Day. Each day I check the Internet to see a new development since this year's elections. Specifically, if Our Ukraine (and its honorary chairman, President Viktor Yushchenko) have reached a decision. Instead, we have the same arguments, indecision, mudslinging and infighting. Each day we read 'Our Ukraine is maybe joining x coalition' or 'Our Ukraine is maybe going into opposition.'

Even the pro-Yushchenko newspaper *Ukrayina Moloda* (Oct. 6) wrote, "Its happened. Our Ukraine has finally stopped moving between two shores and ... It has yet to arrive at either ... But at least is drifting in the right direction." Maybe. Because the ability of this political force to really reach any kind of concrete decision, which nobody believes, can bring to an end its permanent negotiating strategy. That is why, maybe, it is too early to dot the i's. It's better to say: Has it really happened?

Our Ukraine is more than anything central to Ukraine's Groundhog Day. They took credit for holding free elections but refused to accept the results, which were that they had come in third and lost to the Party of Regions and the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc. In this they were similar to the Party of Regions, which has always refused to accept that they lost the 2004 elections.

Since the 2006 elections we have had three months of Our Ukraine simultaneously and duplicitously negotiating with its Orange partners (through Roman Besmertnyi) and with the Party of Regions (through Yuriy Yekhanurov). Both coalitions failed.

Then Our Ukraine negotiated for two months with the Anti-Crisis coalition. This also failed.

Now, Our Ukraine is joining the opposition, with whom it is planning to negotiate. But, what is there to negotiate about? Our Ukraine has 81 deputies and the Tymoshenko bloc 129 and, therefore, Our Ukraine is the minority party in the opposition.

Just as Our Ukraine would have been the minority party in either an Orange or Anti-Crisis coalition. Our Ukraine must be kicking itself for not opting for the Grand coalition, as it was the only coalition of the three (Orange, Grand, Anti-Crisis) where it could mitigate the younger brother. The Party of Regions, desperate to get into government, had conceded the Prime Minister's position to Our Ukraine.

### **Rukh and Our Ukraine**

Our Ukraine as Groundhog Day is reflected in its continuing uncertainty as to whether it is actually in opposition. This is nothing new – Our Ukraine could not decide this question in 2002-2003 and swayed back and forth between Arise Ukraine! and joining pro-Kuchma centrists in a parliamentary coalition. Our Ukraine had no problem in joining a coalition with the Agrarians, Party of Regions, People's Democratic Party (NDP) or Labor Ukraine. The only obstacle was Our Ukraine's refusal to join a coalition with the Social Democratic Party United (SDPUo).

Years later, Our Ukraine demanded that the Anti-Crisis coalition eject the Communists. You see what I mean? Groundhog Day. No change in policies or tactics, and no learning from past mistakes.

Our Ukraine's straddling position between the opposition and government is due to the fact that Our Ukraine was always constituted as a loyal opposition (or as a 'constructive opposition'), rather than as a true opposition party. In this, Our Ukraine were similar to the Communists, who also were a loyal opposition.

Only the Socialist Party and the Tymoshenko bloc adopted an opposition stance, the former throughout most of the 1990s and the latter from the 2000 Kuchmagate crisis. This summer, the Socialist Party (SPU) has joined the loyal opposition Communists with the Party of Regions.

The real opposition has been reduced to the Tymoshenko bloc, and Our Ukraine again represents opposition-lite. National democratic parties not inside parliament, such as Yuriy Kostenko's People's Party, have – like in the Kuchmagate crisis – refused to join the real opposition.

The Reforms and Order Party has gone into opposition. During the Kuchmagate crisis it both refused to join the opposition Ukraine without Kuchma NGO or National Salvation Front, as they were dominated by the SPU and Tymoshenko bloc, and instead created the alternative For Truth NGO.

For Truth eventually evolved in 2003-2004 into the 'yellow' wing of the Pora (It's Time) youth NGO.

'Yellow' Pora worked alongside key Reforms and Order and former For Truth activists, such as Taras Stetskiy and Volodymyr Filenko, in organizing the Orange Revolution.

During the 2000-2001 Kuchmagate and summer 2006 crises, national democrats in Our Ukraine and affiliated parties grappled with the same dilemma. How to be in opposition to one branch of the authorities while supporting the other? Six years ago, Yushchenko was prime minister while Leonid Kuchma was president and today, Yushchenko is president, but Kuchma's chosen successor (Yanukovych) is prime minister.

The attempt to transform the Anti-Crisis into the National Unity coalition by adding Our Ukraine marks a Groundhog Day return to the early 1990s after Ukraine became an independent state. Then President Leonid Kravchuk sought to align himself with national democrats to obtain legitimacy as a post-communist and to receive support for state building in the face of internal and external threats. After Ukraine became an independent state the strategic priority for national democrats was state building; that is, they were first and foremost *derzhavnyky* (state builders) rather than democratic reformers. National democrats were then divided over their attitudes towards cooperating with Kravchuk and now over the Party of Regions. One wing of Rukh led by Vyacheslav Chornovil went into 'constructive (i.e. loyal) opposition to Kravchuk, while another wing, the Congress of National Democratic Forces led by Dmytro Pavlychko, Ivan Drach and Mykhailo Horyn, fully aligned itself with the president.

Our Ukraine split during the summer 2006 crisis in the same manner, with one wing opposed to cooperating with Yanukovych, describing itself as a 'constructive (loyal) opposition' and another willing to be members of the Yanukovych government. In the parliamentary vote on Yanukovych's Prime Ministerial candidacy, 30 out of 80 Our Ukraine MPs voted for him, clearly showing the divide running through the bloc.

As in Groundhog Day, in the early 1990s and today, national democrats, President Yushchenko and a wing of Our Ukraine, seek to cooperate with the Party of Regions believing that national democrats and centrists need to work together to unite Ukraine. National democrats are popular in western-central Ukraine, and centrists in eastern-southern Ukraine.

### **Our Ukraine Have Always Been a Loyal Opposition**

Our Ukraine was established in 2001 after Yushchenko was removed as prime minister by a parliamentary vote of no-confidence. A major figure in Our Ukraine was always Petro Poroshenko, who was first elected to parliament in 1998 in the SDPUo. A year later he acquired the Party of Ukrainian Solidarity (PUS) founded in 1997 in Donetsk, which became the basis for the Solidarity parliamentary faction. Poroshenko sought Kuchma's support, who agreed to back Solidarity as a way to balance the SDPUo's growing power.

The PUS, like Our Ukraine, was construed as a loyal opposition that never in reality opposed Kuchma. In 2001 the PUS agreed to unite with current Kyiv Mayor Leonid Chernovetsky's Beautiful Ukraine party, the Party of Pensioners, Regional Revival of Ukraine and the Labor Party. This became the basis for today's Party of Regions, the political roof of the Donetsk clan, showing the early ties that existed between business members of Our Ukraine and Donetsk. Both were united in their dislike for the SDPUo.

After failing to become head of the united party, Poroshenko registered a new Solidarity Party. Poroshenko's new Solidarity party became a founding member of Our Ukraine. Poroshenko's Solidarity represented the first business alliance with national democratic parties, such as Rukh, who also entered Our Ukraine in the 2002 elections.

Kuchma did not see Our Ukraine as a threat because its leaders, Poroshenko, Yushchenko, and former parliamentary speaker Ivan Pliushch, defined it as different to the real opposition Tymoshenko bloc (registered as the Forum for National Salvation in the 2002 elections) and the SPU. Our Ukraine hoped its stance as loyal opposition would elicit support from Kuchma for Yushchenko to become his chosen successor.

Our Ukraine sought out a niche lying between the pro-Kuchma For a United Ukraine bloc (ZYU) and SDPUo, and the anti-Kuchma SPU and Tymoshenko bloc. Loyal opposition Our Ukraine would, therefore, counterbalance the radical opposition.

The degree to which Our Ukraine's leaders were willing to compromise in their relationship to Kuchma could be seen in its offer by Poroshenko to elect the head of the presidential administration Volodymyr Lytvyn as head of Solidarity.

This would have permitted Lytvyn to have a commanding position inside Our Ukraine and enable him to defend Kuchma's interests inside the bloc. Kuchma refused the offer, instead placing Lytvyn as head of ZYU.

The division in the national democratic camp between the real opposition (Tymoshenko bloc, SPU) and the loyal opposition Our Ukraine was, therefore, only temporarily set aside during the Orange Revolution. Since the Revolution the division has dominated the Yushchenko administration, leading to the dismissal of the Tymoshenko government in September 2005 and following the 2006 elections it showed Our Ukraine as unwilling to accept the return of Tymoshenko to government and unable to decide whether it is in government or in opposition.

Our Ukraine's October ratings are down to 6 percent, down from 14 percent in this year's elections and 24 percent in 2002. Our Ukraine has become a failed party of power as quickly as did the NDP following the 1998 elections. The reasons are built into the Groundhog Day repeat of internal contradictions in the national democratic camp that go back to the founding of the Ukrainian state in 1991.

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