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Vacuums, Reforms and the Need to Regain the Initiative
By Taras Kuzio



The events that came to be known worldwide as the "Orange Revolution" ensured Viktor Yushchenko's election on December 26, 2004. The revolution was widely seen as a democratic breakthrough that would lead to the speeding up of radical reforms. In 2004, Ukrainian society and elites sought change; even most pro-Kuchma elites no longer wanted to live under a micro managing president.

The demands for change were widely understood by the orange camp. But, this aspect of the 2004 elections and orange revolution has never been adequately understood and stereotypes continue to dominate discussions that only one side stood for 'change' (orange) and another for the 'status quo' (blue). In reality, the Ukrainians seeking change were greater in number than those who voted for

Yushchenko. Viktor Yanukovych correctly diagnosed that, "People wanted change. Those that stood under orange flags and those who stood under white-blue (flags)."

Those who voted for Yanukovych in 2004 included a sizeable group of floating voters who sought change and were up for grabs in 2005-2006 by the orange side. Many blue floating voters lived in eastern and southern Ukraine outside of the Donbas and Crimea. The Yulia Tymoshenko bloc picked up some of these blue floating voters in the 2006 elections when it came second in ten out of 14 eastern-southern Ukrainian regions.

Blue hard-core, anti-Yushchenko voters backed the status quo and state paternalism and were virulently anti-American and anti-Western. Many were former Communist or Progressive Socialist voters who defected to Yanukovych in 2004 and the Party of Regions in 2006. This group of voters would never be attracted to the orange camp, no matter what policies it adopted.

This led to two questions

First, what did change mean in terms of policies? There were not only differences between orange and blue voters and elites on this question but there was also a fault line running through the orange camp. Our Ukraine leader Yuriy Yekhanurov had far more in common with the blues than he had with the oranges.

Second, which political force would be the motor of reform and change in post-revolutionary Ukraine? The answer we believed would be Our Ukraine, which transformed itself into the Peoples Union-Our Ukraine party of power in 2005.

Litany of Failed Parties of Power

Ukraine has a history of failed parties of power. Following the 1998 elections, the People's Democratic Party (NDP) led by Prime Minister Valeriy Pustovoitenko was meant to become Kuchma's first party of power. This project failed and the NDP parliamentary faction quickly withered.

The NDP grew out of the Party of Democratic Revival and positioned itself on the moderate wing of the Kuchma regime. It competed for a regional base in western-central Ukraine with the Agrarians and the emerging 'strongman' of Ukrainian politics, Viktor Medvedchuk's Social Democratic United Party (SDPUo).

The NDP had included within its ranks many future Yushchenko key supporters, such as parliamentary speaker Ivan Pliushch, presidential representative in parliament Roman Besmertnyi, Ukrainian Republican Party 'Sobor' leader Anatoliy Matvienko, Volodymyr Filenko and Taras Stetskiv. Some of these left the NDP to create their own parties (Matvienko) or moved to Viktor Pynzenyk's Reforms and Order Party (Filenko, Stetskiv).

The second attempt to create a party of power came in the 2002 elections when

Kuchma supported the creation of the For a United Ukraine election bloc from five regional parties of power (including the NDP, Party of Regions, Labor Ukraine, Agrarians and Anatoliy Kinakh's Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs). The For a United Ukraine bloc disintegrated into numerous splinter parliamentary factions following its poor election performance of 11 percent. The Hetmans that led the five parties refused to consider merging into one party of power.

The third attempt to create a party of power came in 2005 under Yushchenko. The task of organizing the People's Union-Our Ukraine was given again to Besmertnyi. This was a surprising choice as he had failed to establish the NDP as a party of power project. Not surprisingly he failed in his second attempt.

Only two parties agreed to merge into the People's Union-Our Ukraine: Petro Poroshenko's Solidarity and Yuriy Pavlenko's Youth Party. Our Ukraine's remaining parties either demanded to keep their independence as member parties (Rukh, Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, Christian Democratic Union, Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs). Or, they defected from Our Ukraine (Ukrainian Peoples Party, Reform and Order).

Ukraine's poor record of constructing parties of power is similar to Russia under Borys Yeltsin who twice failed to establish parties of power (Russia's Choice, Our Home is Russia [jokingly referred to as Our Home is Gazprom because it was led by Viktor Chernomyrdin]). Yeltsin's Russia, and Kuchma's and Yushchenko's Ukraine have one thing in common: they operated in semi-authoritarian systems where it is impossible to force parties and elites to merge. The failure to create parties of power stands in clear contrast to Russia under Vladimir Putin where the Unified Russia ruling party buttresses his authoritarian regime. Authoritarianism trumps Hetmanschina.

Failure of Pure Liberalism

Pure liberal parties have never had much success in Ukraine. Some have discredited the very concept, such as the Liberals, Donetsk's first party of power in the 1990s. Led by Volodymyr Shcherban, the Liberals are as similar to western liberals as sea lions are to lions.

Other pure liberal political projects, such as the inappropriately named SLON (Elephant [Social-Liberal alliance]), Inter-Regional Bloc of Reforms, Winter Crop Generation (KOP) or Viche failed to generate voter sympathy. They all received less than five percent support in the 1998, 2002 and 2006 elections.

The moderate wing of the former pro-Kuchma camp included the NDP, Labor Ukraine, Agrarians, and Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. The first two disintegrated following the orange revolution, the third renamed itself the People's Party and Volodymyr Lytvyn bloc while the fourth defected to Our Ukraine. The first three failed to enter the 2006 parliament and are unlikely to revive their fortunes in future elections.

Winning Formula

Liberal parties have only been successful in Ukrainian politics when they have combined patriotism with liberalism (i.e. national democracy). This is not unusual in western politics; after all, most center-right parties in Western Europe and North America combine conservative, Christian democrat and patriotic ideologies.

The twinning of patriotic and liberal politics needs to have the right balance. And, in the 2002 elections Our Ukraine did just that. It incorporated all non-left national democratic parties together with businessmen who had moved from the Kuchma camp. Former Deputy Party of Regions leader Poroshenko and presidential parliamentary representative Besmertnyi were both presidential loyalists who played important roles in the election campaign but did not dominate Our Ukraine in 2002. This formula ensured that Our Ukraine came first with 24 percent.

In 2006 the Poroshenko-Besmertnyi business-pragmatic wing had taken over Our Ukraine. This imbalance led to Our Ukraine coming third with 14 percent.

A second problem after finding the right patriotic-liberal balance is that the winning formula of national democratic parties only works in western and central Ukraine, regions that include Ukrainian-speaking majorities.

National democratic parties have rarely formed alliances with pure liberal projects directed at eastern Ukraine; when they have, as in the Our Ukraine-Liberal Party alliance in 2002, it proved disastrous. Liberal projects (SLON, KOP, Viche) have gone it alone, sometimes with massive financing from Viktor Pinchuk (KOP, Viche), but they have nevertheless failed.

The failure of pure liberal projects and the unattractiveness of national democrats in Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine creates a dilemma for elites interested in creating political vehicles to promote reform. Currently, the Party of Regions holds sway over much of eastern Ukraine but it is not a pro-reform party. The Party of Regions is an ideologically vacuous, anti-orange popular front uniting oligarchs and ex-communists. Yanukovich is as much a reformer as Shcherban was a Liberal.

In Search of a Pro-Reform Party

The center-left spectrum has a pro-reform constituency, the Tymoshenko bloc. Her Fatherland Party has the second largest number of regional branches of any political party, a testament to Tymoshenko's organizational skills. The Tymoshenko bloc is set to grow, both at the expense of the Socialists who are likely to be eclipsed in the next elections and because of Tymoshenko's charisma and organizational skills. During her February visit to Washington, everybody was impressed by her energy, dynamism and political stature, inevitably comparing her to Yushchenko's incoherent mumblings and Yanukovich's robotic stiffness.

The only competition that the Tymoshenko bloc could have on the center-left flank would be from Yuriy Lutsenko's Peoples Self Defense movement. Although Lutsenko has a good track record in the Ukraine without Kuchma NGO and orange revolution, the time for movements is over. Ukraine needs pro-reform political parties. He may pick up some disillusioned Socialist voters.

It is the liberal and center-right flanks where there is a large vacuum in Ukrainian politics. Our Ukraine is in terminal crisis with a popularity rate lower than ten percent. Running alone, Rukh could win second place with 9.4 percent in the next elections.

Instead of seeking to cooperate with the Party of Regions in September 2005-September 2006, Our Ukraine could have worked to build up liberal allies in eastern Ukraine. There is a deficit of liberal, pro-reform parties in eastern Ukraine that can take on the Party of Regions in its own terrain.

Our Ukraine itself needs a vast overhaul consisting of six strategic goals. First, clean out the stables. Corrupt senior Our Ukraine leaders need to be expelled. One central reason why Our Ukraine lost the 2006 elections was because its public image on television was that of former Party of Regions leader Poroshenko, drop out Columbia MA student Roman Zvarych and the 'Little Medvedchuk', as Besmertnyi was described when he was the president's man in parliament. Those who are involved in the corrupt energy trade (Oleksandr Tretiakov, Petro Yushchenko) also bring a negative image to Our Ukraine. Our Ukraine could do without such purveyors of negative image.

If Yushchenko and Our Ukraine are sincere about winning votes in eastern Ukraine they need to remove the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (KUN). Anything with 'nationalist' in its name is like a red flag to eastern Ukrainians. KUN's leader is also under investigation for corruption when he was CEO of Naftogaz Ukrainy in 2005, using the occasion to purchase a quarter of a million dollar Mercedes company car with taxpayers' money (massage chair included). KUN started life as a bona fide nationalist party under Yaroslava Stetsko (and Zvarych) in 1992 - but today that is no longer the case.

Second, correct balance. Our Ukraine can only have a winning formula if it returns to its 2002 patriotic: liberal balance. Currently, it is too dominated by pragmatic businessmen for whom Yanukovych is preferable to Tymoshenko and short term lucrative deals to thinking of the national interest.

Third, merge the parties. Why is it possible for the Party of Regions to emerge following the merger of five parties in 2001 (one of which was Poroshenko's Party of Ukrainian Solidarity) while national democrats all want to be little hetmans? Poroshenko to his credit merged his second Solidarity party into the Peoples Union-Our Ukraine in 2005. Its time that Rukh, Republican Party 'Sobor', Mykola Katerynychuk's emerging pro-European movement and the Christian Democratic Union did likewise. Reforms and Order have opted to join the Tymoshenko bloc. Pora, their 2006 election partner, should do likewise.

The realization that this will be difficult has not escaped me. Borys Tarasyuk had

a clear cut choice after October 2006 to either stay on as Foreign Minister or resign as Rukh leader. To be a government minister while being also head of a party in opposition to that same government is even too Byzantine for Ukrainian politics.

Fourth, reach out and support the building of a genuine liberal political force geared towards eastern Ukraine. The understanding would be that once inside parliament there would be a joint coalition and government with Our Ukraine.

Fifth, elect a charismatic leader who has political will and is not afraid of hard work. Clearly with these three conditions lacking, Yushchenko cannot be a serious candidate.

Sixth, develop a more coherent domestic and foreign policy program that focuses on speeding up reform and tackling difficult areas, such as corruption and the rule of law. These reforms would be geared towards the foreign policy goals of NATO and EU membership.

Conclusion

Ukraine's pro-democratic elites were not ready to take power in 2004 and had to stand up against Yanukovich's attempt to impose the Donetsk rules of the game on Ukraine. They therefore lost power in 2006 when Yanukovich became the most influential politician in Ukraine after he returned to power under a new constitution and a weak-willed president.

Ukraine's center-left spectrum is in full working order. The liberal and center-right has four years until the next elections to re-emerge as the serious force it was in 2002. If the above six steps are not undertaken, Ukraine's pro-reform camp will again be not ready to take power in 2011.

The consequences will be negative for domestic policies and will push back further Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic Integration.
