

Isolated **figurehead**

President short of allies as political battle resumes

Taras Kuzio Business Ukraine




Ukraine's parliament returns this week after the summer recess, but throughout the August lull there was no ceasefire along the battle lines of Ukrainian politics. Although the July 11 vote of no confidence in the Yulia Tymoshenko government failed, throughout the summer recess the verbal assaults against the

government by the presidential secretariat have continued. These attacks did not relent following the Georgian crisis and in the face of Russian aggression which could easily train its eye next on Ukraine's Crimean peninsula. With fears mounting that Ukraine could be the next neighbour to feel the weight of a resurgent Russia, the stakes have never been

higher, but rather than unite the country's squabbling Orange forces, the crisis that has arisen as a result of Russia's Georgian adventure has sharpened the war of words within the Orange coalition.

President Yushchenko's tough stance over the Georgian conflict has not improved his ratings and the once popular Orange





ISOLATED FIGUREHEAD: PRESIDENT YUSHCHENKO GIVES HIS INDEPENDENCE DAY ADDRESS AS KYIV MAYOR LEONID CHERNOVETSKIY (IN UKRAINIAN NATIONAL COSTUME) AND PARLIAMENTARY SPEAKER ARSENIY YATSENYUK LOOK ON. OTHER POLITICAL LEADERS STAYED AWAY FROM THE PATRIOTIC CELEBRATION IN A DEMONSTRATION OF THE DIVIDES WITHIN THE ORANGE COALITION GOVERNMENT

Revolution leader now finds himself scrambling for allies and increasingly isolated.

As the autumnal parliamentary season kicks off Ukrainian politics remains divided three ways, with each grouping looking towards the presidential elections in January 2010. The Orange coalition remains in place for the time being, at least on paper, but it remains unclear how committed the President remains to it. The Party of Regions, having lost the July vote, continues to insist that it will raise the issue of re-formatting the coalition in the autumn if, as they confidently expect, the Constitutional Court rules in the party's favour that the coalition no longer exists following the withdrawal of two deputies.

All eyes turn towards presidential elections

Perhaps the most confusing element of the current political free-for-all is the presidential strategy towards ensuring Mr. Yushchenko's re-election for a second term. The prevailing wisdom has been that presidential secretariat head Viktor Baloha had negotiated a backroom deal with the pragmatists of the Party of Regions to support Mr. Yushchenko in exchange for promises of a grand coalition linking the Pres-

ident's parliamentary supporters with a core of Party of Regions deputies. In such a scenario Party of Regions leader Viktor Yanukovich would not therefore stand as a candidate in the 2010 elections.

President Yushchenko's staunch pro-NATO membership stance and his strong support for Georgia in the face of Russia's neo-imperialism has surely now undermined such a deal, if one was indeed ever negotiated. If anything, Mr. Yushchenko is repeating Leonid Kravchuk's 1994 electoral ploy of relying on patriotism and criticism of Russia. This approach was unpalatable even to the most pragmatic Party of Regions supporters and would not serve Mr. Yushchenko well - Mr. Kravchuk lost to Leonid Kuchma, who ran on a platform critical of Mr. Kravchuk's alleged nationalism in the second round of the 1994 elections.

Presidential supporters view PM Yulia Tymoshenko as Mr. Yushchenko's main opponent in the next elections and all of the presidential secretariat's attacks are currently directed against the Orange government. No criticism emanates from the presidential secretariat against the Party of Regions. This presidential strategy is also not working as the President's ratings continue to plummet, while his accusations of treasonous behaviour on the part of Mrs. Tymoshenko have only served to bring ridicule against the President rather than the Prime Minister.

What then is Team Yushchenko's strategy? One option would be to compete with Mrs. Tymoshenko for the Orange vote by using a patriotic platform critical of Russia. This would likely be popular in western and central parts of the country and in such a scenario Mr. Yushchenko would hope to repeat his 2004 victory by winning in round two as the candidate of Ukrainian patriotism.

However, the plan could equally well be to negotiate a deal with the Party of Regions in the hope of drawing on its administrative resources and party machine to win the eastern Ukrainian vote. In round two, Mr. Yushchenko might believe he could win against Mrs. Tymoshenko by branding her as the candidate of instability.

Enter the new Party of Power

One of President Yushchenko's strategies is the creation of a new pro-presidential party. However, judging by the stuttering summer entrance of United Centre, Mr. Yushchenko's new party of power, it is unlikely to be of much use in his cause. Despite constant criticism of the government, United Centre supporters within

the Orange coalition's Our Ukraine-People's Self Defence faction did not vote against the government in the recent no-confidence vote.

United Centre held its inaugural congress in July, keeping close to Soviet tradition with much pomp and circumstance in a ceremony broadcast live on state television. As commentators noted, even Viktor Medvedchuk when head of the presidential administration did not use his position to organise a similar congress for the Social Democratic United Party he led.

The lavish congress failed to hide the fact that United Centre's appearance resembles a stillbirth. Ahead of the big launch event the party was forced to indefinitely postpone a planned convention that was set to merge United Centre with the People's Democratic Party (NDP), a failed party of power from the late 1990s.

United Centre was established in March after a small group of deputies resigned from Our Ukraine-People's Self Defence but opted to remain within the Orange coalition. The new party was administratively established through regional governors and headed up by Mr. Yushchenko's chief of staff Viktor Baloha. Administrative pressure by governors upon state employees to sign up to United Centre is said to be ongoing. Our Ukraine-People's Self-Defence have complained that members of its regional branches are being poached by United Centre.

The NDP, the Democratic Party and the Republican Christian Party fought the 2007 elections in the Ludmilla Supryn-Ukrainian Regional Active bloc that obtained 0.34% of the vote and came in tenth place. All three marginal parties are seen as allies of United Centre although it remains unclear how they are to boost their popularity and that of the President.

A medal for loyalist Kyiv mayor

United Centre is also allied with Kyiv Mayor Leonid Chernovetsky. Mr. Yushchenko backed the mayor in the May 26 pre-term Kyiv elections and issued a medal to him on Ukraine's independence anniversary. This step was vigorously protested by the Tymoshenko bloc which accused the President of having turned round the Orange Revolution slogan "Bandits to prison" with "Bandits to be given medals." Kyiv city council secretary and mayor loyalist Oles Dovhyi remains the link between Mr. Chernovetsky and United Centre and is slated to become the head of its Kyiv branch.

United Centre could have potentially gained some support if it had successfully attracted

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the business wing of Our Ukraine-People's Self Defence that has always been inclined towards a grand coalition with the Party of Regions and is lukewarm towards Mrs. Tymoshenko. United Centre placed high hopes on attracting parliamentary speaker Arseniy Yatseniuk as its leader, a young and respected business leader widely seen as loyal to Mr. Yushchenko. However, Mr. Yatseniuk has repeatedly declined the offer.

Other businessmen in Our Ukraine-People's Self Defence remain loyal to Mr. Yushchenko but do not want to participate in a political project promoted by presidential secretariat head Baloha, who has reportedly poor relations with both the majority pro-Tymoshenko and minority pro-Yushchenko wings of OUPSD. The Self Defence wing of Our Ukraine-People's Self-Defence is financed by Davyd Zhvannia, the former member of Mr. Yushchenko's inner circle who was recently the subject of an investigation to annul his Ukrainian citizenship. This campaign was orchestrated, Interior Minister Yuriy Lutsenko believes, by the presidential secretariat. Mr. Zhvannia's relations with Mr. Yushchenko later hit rock bottom after he claimed the President had not been poisoned during the 2004 election campaign.

The United Centre experiment looks doomed for a number of reasons. Firstly, Ukraine's regional diversity makes it impossible to have a single party that is pan-Ukrainian. Opposition forces during Kuchma's second term and Orange forces in 2004 were drawn from western-central Ukraine. Pro-Kuchma centrists and supporters of Viktor Yanukovich's candidacy in 2004 were drawn from eastern-southern Ukraine.

The only political force to have broken the regional divide has been the Tymoshenko bloc, BYUT. In the September 2007 pre-term elections BYUT became Ukraine's first national party by winning votes in eastern-southern Ukraine, traditionally a region hostile to Orange parties. Our Ukraine could only win a single oblast in the 2007 elections, not coincidentally Baloha's home ground of Trans-Carpathia. The Party of Regions has been unable to break into central Ukraine and can forget about winning votes in western Ukraine (especially after the Georgian crisis). The Communists have always been constrained to the Donbas and Crimea.

Secondly, a pan-Ukrainian party of power requires an underpinning and over-arching national identity that can produce a unifying nationalism, as in Russia under Vladimir Putin. Ukraine has a strong territorial identity bequeathed to it from the Soviet regime but it does not have an ideological nationalism (civic

or ethnic) that could be drawn upon by a president seeking to inculcate support for a national party of power.

In regionally diverse Ukraine it is impossible at this stage in the country's nation-building process to create a pan-national party of power. Following the 2002 elections the For a United Ukraine bloc quickly split into its five constituent parties in parliament. Under Mr. Kuchma Ukraine's regional oligarchs and parties fought each other as much as they fought the opposition.

United Centre's ideology is defined as "united centrism" which incorporates "patriotism, truth and pragmatism." This kind of amorphous ideological content has already been tested and failed in the myriad of centrist parties created under Mr. Kuchma and was only ever popular in eastern Ukraine. United Centre's ideology is therefore unlikely to unite Ukrainians or lay the foundation for a pan-national party.

Thirdly, successful parties of power require a popular president who can lead them. Unified Russia has won mass support by drawing on Vladimir's Putin's popularity. Similarly in Azerbaijan President Heydar Aliyev's Yeni Azerbaijan party is more popular than the opposition. Unpopular presidents, whether Russia's Boris Yeltsin, Georgia's Eduard Shevardnadze or Ukraine's Kuchma and Yushchenko will not build a successful party of power.

Fourthly, parties of power are more likely to be successful in autocratic systems where elites and businessmen can be cajoled into joining them. Two attempts at creating them in democratic Russia under Yeltsin and two similar efforts in Kuchma's Ukraine failed. Meanwhile, one attempt to establish a party of power succeeded under autocratic Mr. Putin. Mr. Yushchenko is President of an increasingly democratic Ukraine and a similar fate will therefore befall United Centre.

A history of failed parties

Ukrainian leaders have attempted to build numerous parties of power in the past, two under the Kuchma presidency and two under Yushchenko, only to end in failure. In the 1998 elections the NDP was promoted as Kuchma's new party of power with electoral rhetoric similar to Russia's Our Home is Russia (or as it was nicknamed *Nash Dom Gazprom* or *Our Home is Gazprom*). In Russia (Viktor Chernomyrdin) and Ukraine (Valeriy Pustovoitenko) the country's respective prime ministers were heads of the presidential parties of power. Despite huge administrative resources the NDP

received only 5% in the 1998 elections and won 17 seats in parliament. Another 71 deputies were elected in single mandate districts giving the NDP the second largest faction in parliament.

Following the replacement of Mr. Pustovoitenko by Mr. Yushchenko as prime minister in 1999 the NDP faction began to disintegrate. This reflected a common problem afflicting parties of power; rather than a lack of loyalty to the party its supporters provided temporary support in exchange for the rents (corruption) that could be obtained through the party's access to the levers of government.

A second party of power, For a United Ukraine, was established for the 2002 elections consisting of five pro-Kuchma centrist parties. As with the NDP, it obtained low support of 11% in the proportional half of the elections, despite again benefitting from massive administrative resources, but made up for this in deputies elected in single mandate districts.

In 2005 the People's Union-Our Ukraine was established as Yushchenko's new party of power. But this project failed to fulfil its main objective of merging the remaining disparate national democratic parties within Our Ukraine. The same failure to merge nine parties befell Our Ukraine-Peoples Self-Defence after the 2007 elections (despite electoral rhetoric promising to create a merged pro-presidential party). United Centre will become Ukraine's fourth failed party of power if, as widely expected, it fails to secure Mr. Yushchenko a second term.

Ukraine's politicians go back to work this week with the early July battle lines left firmly in place. Thus far, Ukraine's elites have not drawn the right conclusions from the first half of 2008, which were largely squandered on political in-fighting and instability, nor have they come to terms productively with the emergence of Russia's new imperialism in August, something which could quickly become a threat to Ukraine's territorial integrity. If Ukraine continues to suffer from political instability in the approach to the December 2008 NATO review meeting its ruling elites will only have themselves to blame for not being invited into a Membership Action Plan that would place Ukraine on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration. ●

- Taras Kuzio is editor of Ukraine Analyst and adjunct professor in the Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, where he teaches on Post-Communist Transitions and Democratic Revolution.