

# Crisis country

## Ukraine's seasonal political stand-offs have become a damaging modern tradition

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The collapse of the Orange coalition on 3 September has plunged Ukraine into yet another crisis. If the Orange parliamentary majority is not re-formed, Ukraine will face the likely creation of an indefinite coalition of convenience featuring the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc (BYUT) and the Party of Regions. The only alternative would appear to be pre-term elections that would be held in January at the earliest, meaning Ukraine would not have a new coalition and government in place until some time next April. If that were to transpire, the new government would be only in power for just nine months before the country was again plunged into a fresh election season, this time for a new president.

### Annual Crises

Ukraine has experienced annual political crises every year since 2001. This latest crisis could last six months if pre-term elections are held, or even longer if a potential BYUT-Regions coalition stays put. These annual collapses in Ukraine's political stability reflect the growing pains of a country struggling to make the ambitious leap from a totalitarian past towards a democratic model. They are also the product of personal rivalries and clan interests within the higher echelons of the country's political elite that are threatening to degrade and discredit Ukraine's fledgling democracy.

### Sowing the seeds of the Orange Revolution

In November 2000 Ukraine experienced a near revolution when then-president Leonid Kuchma was implicated by secret recordings in the scandal surrounding the death of Giorgi Gongadze, an outspoken journalist who had been kidnapped and murdered. The opposition 'Ukraine Without Kuchma' movement that arose out of Kuchmagate earned its spurs in the 2002 elections and went on to form the nucleus of the activist army which mobilised for the 2004 Orange Revolution. Ever since Kuchmagate rocked the country to its political foundations, stability has been in short supply.

In the following year Ukraine experienced another crisis when the government led by popular reformist Prime Minister Viktor Yush-

chenko was removed. Two months earlier his deputy PM Yulia Tymoshenko had been imprisoned before eventually being released without charge. Mrs. Tymoshenko remains the only member of Ukraine's elites to ever have experienced the inside of a Ukrainian jail. This spring 2001 political crisis launched both Mr. Yushchenko and Mrs. Tymoshenko as opposition leaders and set them on the road to the Orange Revolution.

### The dangers of democracy exposed

In 2002 the Kuchma regime experienced a radical shock when the opposition, led by Mr. Yushchenko, scored a clear win in parliamentary elections, forcing the Communist Party into second place for the first time since 1994. The remainder of the year produced a mounting opposition movement ('Arise Ukraine!') that challenged the Kuchma regime itself. Parliament became a battleground between the opposition and Kuchma loyalists. Later that year Viktor Yanukovych emerged from his Donetsk base to become prime minister, a position that should have rightfully gone to Mr. Yushchenko whose Our Ukraine clearly won the elections. This political struggle escalated throughout 2003 as President Kuchma sought to introduce constitutional reforms that would greatly strengthen his position as fears mounted over the possibility of a future Yushchenko presidency.

### Orange epiphany fails to break crisis tradition

2004 arrived with Ukraine's political forces already on the verge of all-out war as the country braced itself for a new presidential vote. The presidential election campaign itself began in July and was marked by media bias, vote-rigging and unprecedented Russian involvement in support of the government candidate Viktor Yanukovych. The end result was the Orange Revolution and yet more political gridlock, with the country literally grinding to a halt for two months as mass protests forced a revote. The victory of the Orange Revolution in preventing the government from stealing the election was widely toasted as Ukraine's historical democratic breakthrough, but the

success of the 2004 people power demonstrations did not prevent Ukraine from continuing with its annual crises. If anything, the move towards democracy has led to greater conflict within the country's political elites.

### Compromising on the promises of the revolution

The first year of Mr. Yushchenko's presidency was blighted by the removal of the Tymoshenko government after only eight months in office, sparking what was the first post-Orange Revolution crisis. Faced with a hostile parliament that was unwilling to accept his candidate as replacement PM, Mr. Yushchenko struck a backroom deal with his former arch rival Mr. Yanukovych that granted blanket immunity to those involved in the election fraud of 2004. The previous year's "Bandits to jail" slogan, which Mr. Yushchenko had popularised during the Orange Revolution, was quietly consigned to the history books. The crisis had been overcome, but the credibility of Ukrainian democracy had taken a severe knock in the process.

### Blocking Yulia Tymoshenko at all costs

In both 2006 and 2007 spectacular crises arose from the unwillingness of President Yushchenko to allow Yulia Tymoshenko to form a new administration. Orange forces won both the 2006 and 2007 parliamentary elections but on both occasions defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory.

Throughout the long summer deadlock of 2006 Mr. Yushchenko pursued a devious multi-vector strategy of negotiating parallel Orange and grand coalitions which backfired disastrously. The unexpected defection of the ostensibly Orange Socialist Party paved the way for the creation of an appropriately named Anti-Crisis coalition led by the Party of Regions. This, in turn, permitted the unexpected return of Mr. Yanukovych as PM.

### Mr. Yanukovych's counter-reformation leads to new clash

The dust had barely settled on this coalition crisis before the next round of debilitating struggles began. The Yanukovych government



PM YULIA TYMOSHENKO DISPLAYS A SUMMONS CALLING HER TO GIVE EVIDENCE AT THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE LAST WEEK AS PART OF THE INVESTIGATION INTO PRESIDENT YUSHCHENKO'S 2004 POISONING. THE SUMMONS ARRIVED AS THE TWO FORMER ORANGE ALLIES FACED OFF IN AN INCREASINGLY BITTER CONFRONTATION WHICH HAS BEEN BREWING FOR MANY MONTHS AND FINALLY ERUPTED IN EARLY SEPTEMBER



took just eight months to push Mr. Yushchenko into a corner, at which point he surprised everybody by disbanding parliament and calling fresh elections. The ensuing constitutional crisis nearly led to bloodshed which was avoided in a typically Ukrainian way when traffic police halted Interior Ministry troops on their way to Kyiv. The troops were obviously not very enthusiastic about their orders from the President.

The 2007 victory of Orange forces set the stage for Mrs. Tymoshenko's triumphant return to office, but throughout the post-election negotiation stage it was evident that the Tymoshenko bloc's powerhouse performance at the polls had served to strengthen the distrust and competition between the President and his erstwhile Orange ally.

### The roots of Ukraine's 2008 crisis

The writing on the wall could be seen only four days after Mrs. Tymoshenko's confirmation as Prime Minister, when Party of Regions faction leader Raisa Bohatiorova was unexpectedly appointed secretary of the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC). The NSDC and the presidential secretariat soon launched a pincer movement to emasculate, criticise and undermine the Tymoshenko government.

In the first four months of the year the government ignored these joint presidential secretariat-NSDC attacks, while public sympathy for Mrs. Tymoshenko made her Ukraine's most popular politician. The President's ratings,

meanwhile, continued to remain in the doldrums.

In mid-April Mrs. Tymoshenko struck back and from then until the end of June the country witnessed a full scale civil war within the Orange camp. Nevertheless, the government survived a No Confidence vote in early July after Mr. Yushchenko's allies within the Orange camp, grouped around the hastily created United Centre party, chickened out and did not join the Party of Regions in voting down the Tymoshenko administration. It would seem that nobody wanted early elections after all.

This setback did not prevent President Yushchenko's team from continuing to pursue a policy of attacking Mrs. Tymoshenko at every turn. Late August saw presidential chief of staff Viktor Baloha go public with charges of treason levelled against Mrs. Tymoshenko personally. The Prime Minister was accused of accepting Russian support in the 2010 presidential elections in return for her silence over Russia's invasion of Georgia. For good measure, Mr. Baloha also accused Mrs. Tymoshenko of plotting to assassinate him and claimed that she also involved in the 2004 poisoning of the President.

These absurd charges pushed Ukrainian politics over the edge and led directly to the current crisis. The 350 pages of evidence which were submitted by the SBU along with the treason charges levelled against Mrs. Tymoshenko were turned down two days later by a prosecutor's office not normally known for its unwillingness to play footsie with the President. However, on this occasion they ruled that there was nothing in the evidence provided that would warrant a criminal investigation.

### Attack remains the best form of defence for PM

Tymoshenko was essentially acting in self-defence on 2 September when she broke from her Orange coalition allies to vote with opposition blocs to curtail the President's powers. She defended her decision by portraying it as an attempt to prevent any further escalation of the Kuchma-era style repression that the secretariat and SBU, both with the President's blessing, were said to be preparing for Mrs. Tymoshenko. The counter-attack nipped Operation Baloha in the bud and again showed the utter futility and incompetence of President Yushchenko's crisis manager.

### What now for isolated President?

The President now has few good options left

on the table. If he agrees to revive the Orange coalition it could only be on Mrs. Tymoshenko's terms, meaning at the very minimum the removal of Mr. Baloha. If he holds out against Mrs. Tymoshenko then BYUT and the Party of Regions could create a stabilising coalition of convenience that may be defined as temporary but could prove to be longer lasting.

The President is also suffering from an increasing shortage of heavyweight allies. His team have done such a great job of antagonising former Defence Minister Anatoliy Hrytsenko, whose intervention saved Mr. Yushchenko during last year's crisis, that he was rewarded by his dismissal. Interior Minister Yuriy Lutsenko was subjected - like former Yushchenko allies Mr. Zhvannia and Mrs. Tymoshenko - to Kuchma-style SBU political investigation. It's a no brainer that Mr. Hrytsenko and Mr. Lutsenko did not support NUNS's withdrawal from the coalition.

### New elections: a dangerous game for all

If Mr. Yushchenko calls early elections his Our Ukraine bloc, with only between 4% support national, could be decimated. The bloc is divided over the crisis with four out of its nine parties not giving their support to its withdrawal from the coalition. Two of these - Rukh and Mr. Lutsenko's Self Defence - are the largest within the bloc. The vote to withdraw from the coalition was only supported by the bare minimum of 39 out of 72 deputies and even that was only accomplished after the secretariat cajoled deputies by telephone.

### Yushchenko's role as Ukraine's crisis facilitator

All four governments under Mr. Yushchenko have experienced difficult relationships with the President, whether under the 1996 or 2006 constitutions. Three governments have been removed or undermined by the President, two led by Mrs. Tymoshenko and a third by Mr. Yanukovich. A fourth government led by Yury Yekhanurov was removed by a parliamentary vote of no confidence. All four governments have only been in power for eight months before crises made their presence felt.

Eight months of attempts to undermine the current government have produced the current chaos and provoked possibly the most dangerous crisis for Mr. Yushchenko since he took office in 2005. There are now few analysts in Ukraine who believe that he has any chance of winning a second term. ●

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