

OP-ED

Yushchenko's big mistake

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For the president, removing Yulia Tymoshenko from office is more important than responding to the global economic and financial tsunami that will hit Ukraine.

Ukraine could have easily avoided a second pre-term election in two years. Zerkalo Nedeli's editor Yulia Mostovaya recently explained the reason why the president was so insistent on an election rather than a new coalition: "It is the only sure way to get rid of Yulia Tymoshenko as prime minister. Frankly speaking, that is what all the fuss is really about."

For the president, removing his former Orange Revolution ally from office is more important than responding to the global economic and financial tsunami that will hit Ukraine. It is more important than NATO membership (for which political stability is paramount). Last, but not least, the objective ignores Tymoshenko's popularity (which is six times that of the president's) and the lack of public support for a third election in three years.

The conflict between Tymoshenko and Victor Yushchenko is not ideological. It has nothing to do with different attitudes to the Georgian crisis and is not because of her alleged "treason." Yushchenko has, of late, frothed at the mouth in his dislike for her and, in the process, has dragged Ukraine's image to a low level. The president's attacks on Tymoshenko inside and especially outside Ukraine have, in Mostovaya's eyes, "not spared our self esteem, dignity and international reputation."

A larger Orange coalition could have easily been established during the 30-day deadline permitted by the Constitution. It would have had 248 deputies and therefore possessed a stable majority. All deputies in the Tymoshenko and Volodymyr Lytvyn blocs had signed up to the larger coalition, as had 34 out of 72 Our Ukraine-Peoples Self Defense (OU-PSD) deputies. The remaining OU-PSD 38 deputies had been cajoled, bribed or both to stay away. Only 39 (out of 72) deputies had initially voted for OU-PSD to withdraw from the Orange coalition on Sept. 3, a slim majority of two obtained after intense lobbying and threats.

The president and his secretariat blocked the formation of the enlarged Orange coalition. They controlled up to 50 percent of OU-PSD deputies. Vyacheslav Kyrylenko, head of the faction and leader of one of its nine parties, the pro-presidential Peoples Union-Our Ukraine, became a willing stooge of the president's strategy.

The day before the president disbanded parliament, he met with the OU-PSD faction. Instead of initiating a dialogue in an attempt to save the Orange coalition at all costs, the president, according to those present, gave a 20-minute monologue on how a coalition with the Tymoshenko bloc was impossible. He then got up and left the room.

Yushchenko refused to permit a vote to be held, as some deputies called for, to see where majority sentiment lay. Yushchenko insulted those deputies who supported a new Orange coalition as being without "parents and ancestors."

Under the 2006 Constitution, the only manner in which Tymoshenko can be removed is by the creation of a new coalition. The previous 1996-2005 Constitution gave the president the right to dismiss the government, which he used in September 2005, when he removed Tymoshenko. This is a step that divided the Orange forces for the next 18 months.

Yushchenko could also have supported an alternative coalition, rather than pre-term elections, but that would have forced an untenable alliance with the Party of Regions.

What then is the president's strategy?

Incredibly, he has been convinced that five pro-Yushchenko forces (Peoples Union-Our Ukraine, Viktor Baloha's United Center, Kyiv Mayor Leonid Chernovetskiy's bloc, and the new Arseniy Yatseniuk and Raisa Bohatyriova parties) will succeed in obtaining 5 percent each, thereby together obtaining a similar result to Our Ukraine in 2002, when it won 24 percent. Yushchenko has agreed to include his name on the Peoples Union-Our Ukraine bloc, hoping to repeat his 2002 victory when Our Ukraine came first.

This strategy assumes that a sizeable number of pro-Yushchenko deputies will want to establish a grand coalition with the Party of Regions. Yushchenko will demand that the grand coalition support his technocratic candidate for prime minister, Defense Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov or parliamentary speaker Yatsenyuk, and Yushchenko's candidacy in the January 2010 presidential elections.

There are two paradoxes. Firstly, Yushchenko has pushed for pre-term elections "so long and hard, he is the least of all prepared for it," Mostovaya believes. Pro-presidential forces are a motley crew. Secondly, the strategy's assumption that five political forces would each win 5 percent is whistling in the wind. Two of the five are not even created. The strategy of entering a grand coalition relies on double standards, treats Ukrainians as idiots and is full of contradictions. In aligning with the Regions, Yushchenko's re-election bid would destroy his support in western and central Ukraine. Also, it assumes that the Regions can cajole its voters to back Yushchenko, somebody they have always detested.

Thirdly, the strategy assumes pro-presidential political forces will retain their 2006 and 2007 result of 14 percent or improve them to 25 percent in a pre-term election.

Fourthly, it assumes that all pro-presidential forces will support a grand coalition. Kyrylenko, who heads the party of which the president is honorary chairman, repeatedly stated that his political force would never join a coalition with the Regions. Meanwhile, Yushchenko supports such a coalition.

Fifthly, the strategy fails to take into account that the only two political forces that are likely to improve their support are the Tymoshenko bloc and the Party of Regions, that could then establish their own coalitions and marginalize the president. The most dangerous threat could come from the Party of Regions joining the Lytvyn bloc and the Communists to create another "anti-crisis" coalition with Yanukovich as prime minister. In the disbanded parliament, these three forces are only four deputies short of a coalition (222), a handicap that could be easily overcome if any of the three improve their performance in pre-term elections.

The president's strategy will undermine Ukraine's ability to weather the global economic and financial crisis, and derail Ukraine's path to NATO. It will fail and backfire. The president's preference for elections over compromise will finish any ambitions that Yushchenko has for a second term.

Tymoshenko was the key to Yushchenko's victory in the Orange Revolution. It is now too late for him to reach this conclusion, one that most in Ukraine have long understood.

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