

## Ukraine's president pushes the panic button

- Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko dissolved parliament on 2 April and called new elections for 27 May to prevent the Anti-Crisis Coalition from gaining a constitutional majority and making him powerless
- Parliament is refusing to disband and questions the legality of the presidential decree, and institutional conflict between parliament and the executive could be deepened by regional conflict
- While new elections are a risk for Yushchenko, if the crisis continues, there is a chance, albeit limited, of wider division and instability throughout the country

On 2 April, President Viktor Yushchenko issued a decree disbanding parliament and calling for parliamentary elections, previously due in 2011, to be held on 27 May. The announcement follows months of political crisis that have seen the president's position steadily undermined by Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich and the Anti-Crisis Coalition he leads.

A key demand from Yushchenko and the radical wing of the Orange Revolution, represented by the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc, was an end to the alleged bribing and poaching of parliamentary deputies from the opposition, represented by the Tymoshenko bloc and the pro-Yushchenko Our Ukraine, to the Anti-Crisis Coalition. The decision to disband parliament was a response to a fear that the Anti-Crisis Coalition would soon obtain a constitutional majority of 300 deputies and almost completely sideline the president and the opposition.

Meanwhile, the Anti-Crisis Coalition in parliament has refused to follow the presidential decree or provide funding for the elections and has continued to attempt to function, while thousands of Yanukovich supporters have taken to the streets to protest Yushchenko's decision.

### Constitutional crisis

The current political crisis has its roots in the 2004 presidential elections, which Yushchenko won after a compromise that included a re-run second round and constitutional reforms. These hastily formulated and ill-conceived reforms transformed Ukraine from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary-presidential republic. One key reform transferred control over the cabinet of ministers from the president to a parliamentary coalition.

The first to benefit from these reforms was the Anti-Crisis Coalition, formed in July-August 2006 by the Party of Regions, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party following the failure of Yushchenko and Tymoshenko to re-form an Orange Coalition after the March 2006 parliamentary elections. This returned Yanukovich to the position of prime minister and

vested him with enhanced powers allowing him to undermine and isolate the president. Yushchenko subsequently felt compelled to act to prevent Yanukovych's complete takeover of power.

## Potential discord

Yushchenko's announcement on 2 April has revived fears of regional conflict last expressed during the 2004 Orange Revolution. Indeed, a prolonged crisis with the Party of Regions supporting a boycott of the elections in eastern Ukraine could again threaten the unity of the Ukrainian state.

Orange and Anti-Crisis Coalition supporters have their strongholds in different regions of Ukraine. Traditionally, this has seen Yanukovych gain his support in the east of the country, whereas Yushchenko and Tymoshenko have garnered a greater following in the centre and west. The city of Kiev is an Orange stronghold, but the Anti-Crisis Coalition has transported its supporters from Donetsk to the capital to sustain protests.

If the crisis is drawn out, the Orange and Anti-Crisis Coalition crowds in Kiev could become less peaceful. The Party of Regions is alleged to have previously drawn upon unofficial organised crime enforcers to stage provocations at such rallies. This has raised the risk of violent confrontation between the rival supporters.

While a clash between rival supporters is conceivable, the chances of the crisis escalating beyond the remit of politics and into the military sphere are slim. It is likely that military and security personnel would remain neutral or loyal to the president and his close ally, former minister of the interior Yuriy Lutsenko, who heads the pro-presidential non-governmental organisation People's Self-Defence. Following his 2 April decree, Yushchenko added General Oleksandr Kihtenko, commander of Ministry of the Interior Internal Troops, to his National Security Council to shore up his position.

## Future scenarios

Beyond the fears of societal division and domestic conflict, a more probable development will be a peaceful resolution to the crisis along one of three lines.

The involvement of the US, EU or Council of Europe, as during the Orange Revolution, could help to negotiate a face-saving compromise. However, this is the least likely of the three peaceful scenarios, as a reversal of the decree could return Yushchenko to his position as a lame duck president.

More probably, the Anti-Crisis Coalition and parliament could eventually agree to participate in the May elections. In this scenario, Our Ukraine and the Tymoshenko bloc could win a slight majority of seats and create an Orange coalition and government headed by Tymoshenko. However, this would be by no means guaranteed. If the Party of Regions and its leftist allies won a majority, they could again create a coalition similar to the Anti-Crisis Coalition.

Yet the latter scenario relies on the decision of the constitutional court. Should it rule that Yushchenko's decree was unconstitutional and illegal, deputies would be likely to defect from the opposition to the Anti-Crisis Coalition, which would quickly form a constitutional

majority. Impeachment proceedings could ensue, followed by Yushchenko's resignation and early presidential elections

## FORECAST

The main winner from the crisis is Tymoshenko. In early elections, her bloc would be likely to come a close second to the Party of Regions and, in an ensuing Orange Coalition, she would become prime minister. However, Yanukovich could still turn the tables on his Orange Coalition rivals and consolidate his position as the key political power in Ukraine. Should the crisis continue unabated, the potential for violence would also grow and with this would come the risk of wider societal division and widespread domestic instability.

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