

OUR UKRAINE AND VIKTOR YUSHCHENKO REVIVE THEIR FORTUNES

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On April 18, the opposition Yulia Tymoshenko (BYuT) and Our Ukraine blocs permanently withdrew their deputies from Ukraine's parliament. Together, the factions account for 202 of the Rada's 450 deputies. With no constitutional majority, the parliament -- which was disbanded by presidential decree on April 2 -- has no legal standing. A minimum of 300 deputies is required for parliament to constitutionally operate.

This move is the culmination of eight months of political fighting between Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich and his government and the disunited and partially discredited opposition. But now the opposition has transformed into an energized political force. Reflecting this growing confidence, President Viktor Yushchenko, Our Ukraine, and Yuriy Lutsenko's People's Self-Defense movement no longer oppose early elections.

Opposition unity was made possible by a shift in the balance of power within Our Ukraine and an effort to reach out to the Tymoshenko bloc. BYuT had always been in opposition to the Anti-Crisis Coalition (ACC) and had never supported a grand coalition with Yanukovich's Party of Regions. Following the 2004 Orange Revolution, the "Liubi Druzi" (business cronies or "Dear Friends") wing of Our Ukraine had dominated, and then-prime minister Yuriy Yekhanurov disastrously led it during the 2006 parliamentary elections.

The "Liubi Druzi" supported a grand coalition -- and opposed Yulia Tymoshenko -- while the national-democratic wing backed an Orange coalition. Both coalition variants were negotiated simultaneously from April-June 2006 but neither succeeded, and the ACC was established following the defection of the Socialist Party.

In August 2006 all parliamentary forces except BYuT signed a "Universal Agreement" that created a still-larger grand coalition, now including the Communists. Two months later Our Ukraine pulled out and declared itself in opposition to the ACC.

It took another four months before Our Ukraine signed an opposition alliance with BYuT. The alliance reflected the new dominance of Our Ukraine's national-democratic wing.

The "Liubi Druzi" opposed the opposition alliance and, together with inducements such as government positions, prompted defections to the ACC the following month, led by Anatoliy Kinakh's Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (PPPU).

A second echelon of defectors came from "Liubi Druzi" closer to President Yushchenko's inner circle. Petro Poroshenko was offered the position of minister of finance and was reportedly considering defecting. Poroshenko had been a founding organizer of the Party of Regions in 2000-2001 until moving to Our Ukraine in 2002.

Yushchenko had called for Our Ukraine to be "radically overhauled." The withdrawal of Kinakh's PPPU has been followed by the marginalization of "Liubi Druzi" such as Poroshenko, and the culling of other unpopular parties and discredited members. Two of Our Ukraine's remaining four parties have joined the Ukrainian Rightists bloc, while another has joined People's Self-Defense. The fourth party, the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, was not invited to join any bloc because its leader, former Naftohaz CEO Oleksiy Ivchenko, was

discredited two years ago when it was revealed that he had purchased a \$225,000 Mercedes car with Naftohaz Ukrainy state funds.

Yushchenko's decision to dissolve parliament served as a pre-emptive strike against further defections that threatened to lead to a constitutional majority.

Yushchenko, Our Ukraine, and the People's Self-Defense embraced BYuT's call for early elections after Kinakh's defections and the police raids on Lutsenko's apartment and offices. People's Self-Defense was established by Our Ukraine businessmen, such as Davyd Zhvannia, who had become discontented by the "Liubi Druzi."

On March 31, the Our Ukraine congress elected Vyacheslav Kyrylenko as its head. This confirmed a national-democratic takeover, as Kyrylenko is a former member of Yuriy Kostenko's Ukrainian People's Party (UNP), one of three offshoots of the pre-1999 Rukh movement.

This development was matched by the change in leadership of the presidential secretariat. Viktor Baloha is the third secretariat head since Yushchenko's election and the first with managerial skills. Baloha, like Kyrylenko, is a national democrat and closer to BYuT. The two ousted secretariat heads (Oleksandr Zinchenko, Oleh Rybachuk) and former Our Ukraine head (Yekhanurov) are aligned with the "Liubi Druzi."

Kyrylenko has ruled out any grand coalition after the elections. "We are strong members of the united opposition and are going into elections practically as one front, and, I think, that democracy will again flourish," he said.

Yushchenko has called for the creation of a mega center-right "pro-presidential bloc." Baloha is seeking to unite the disparate center-right into such a bloc.

Currently the center-right is divided among Our Ukraine, the Ukrainian Rightists (Rukh, UNP, and the Republican Party 'sobor") and Lutsenko's bloc (People's Self-Defense, Christian-Democratic Union, European Platform, and Forward Ukraine!). Center-right unity would facilitate a two-pronged right-left opposition with BYuT representing the center-left wing.

The opposition more closely resembles that found in the 2002 and 2004, rather than the 2006, elections. However, in the 2002 and 2004 elections the opposition still had moderate (Our Ukraine) and radical (BYuT, SPU) wings. Now, Our Ukraine has moved from a moderate to a BYuT radical stance for the first time in its six-year history.

These developments explain both President Yushchenko's radicalized stance and the unity of the opposition. The Party of Regions has been taken aback by this new opposition energy and unity and remains in a state of denial that Our Ukraine and Yushchenko have the same stance as BYuT. "Inside Our Ukraine and BYuT there are principled differences on tactics that its leaders are proposing," Party of Regions faction leader Raisa Bohatiorova believes.

The ACC has sought to appease Yushchenko by dealing with many of the issues that provoked him to act and support BYuT's call for early elections, hoping to again divide Our Ukraine and BYuT. After parliament was disbanded the ACC voted to eject deputies who had defected to it, and it has agreed to support the imperative mandate and transforming the 2006 Universal into law.

Yushchenko's handling of the crisis, the revamped Our Ukraine, and opposition unity have

ramifications for the 2009 elections, which is far enough in the future to rebuild Yushchenko's popularity. In the last month, Yushchenko's ratings have increased nearly two-fold from 11% to 18%.

Although Yushchenko's ratings remain half those of Yanukovych (35%) he now has pulled even with Tymoshenko, and together the two Orange candidates have 35%. With the same ratings as Tymoshenko, Yushchenko can now argue that he should be the Orange candidate, something he could not plausibly do before the crisis.

(Ukrayinska pravda, April 7-18, Zerkalo Tyzhnia, April 14-20)