

TIME FOR YUSHCHENKO TO LET HIS HEAD RULE HIS HEART

ANALYSIS & COMMENTARY: By Taras Kuzio
Business Ukraine magazine, Kyiv, Ukraine, Monday, Oct 15, 2007

Yulia Tymoshenko's spectacular gains in last month's elections have been interpreted as a sharp rebuke to the Party of Regions. They also represent a biting response from the electorate to the leadership of President Yushchenko, and offer him little choice but to commit himself to a new Orange coalition with Tymoshenko increasingly calling the shots

Ukraine's pre-term elections held on September 30 are over. Although more bitterly fought out than last year's elections, they were declared to have been held in a 'free and fair' manner by the OSCE, EU, Council of Europe, USA, and Canada.

[1] Ukraine can be justifiably proud that it has held a second consecutive free election in a Eurasian regional environment where autocracies rule.

CONSISTENTLY DEMOCRATIC COUNTRY

[2] A second aspect that Ukrainians can be justifiably proud of is that the election results are the fourth victory in five years of the democratic and Orange opposition.

In three parliamentary elections (2002, 2006, 2007) and one presidential election (2004) the democratic-Orange opposition either came first or won (albeit slim) majorities.

In this year's elections the Orange forces have a slim majority which would increase to 248 deputies if the Volodymyr Lytvyn bloc joins it. The Party of Regions with the Communists and the Lytvyn bloc together fall short of 225 seats.

Both of these factors - the holding of free elections and Ukrainian voter support for democratic forces - shows to what degree Ukraine is more in the European than in the Eurasian mainstream. It's time the EU woke up to the new democratic boy on the block.

CAUSES FOR CONTINUED CONCERN

While this is a source of great optimism, other aspects of the elections are more depressing.

Anybody who knows Viktor Yushchenko and the Our Ukraine bloc he set up in late 2001 also knows that there has always been a split personality in both Yushchenko and his bloc. This apparent identity crisis rests on two issues.

[1] Firstly, the difficult amalgamation of national democratic forces and business groups into one political force (Our Ukraine).

The Yulia Tymoshenko bloc (BYUT) has a similar profile but the main crucial difference is that Tymoshenko dominates and decides BYUT's position whereas Our Ukraine has had weak and indecisive leaders for its entire six year existence (i.e., Viktor Yushchenko, Roman Besmertnyi, Yuriy Yekhanurov, Vyacheslav Kyrlylenko). None of these four can match Tymoshenko's organisational skills and leadership qualities.

THE NATIONAL INTEREST VS. DEMOCRACY?

[2] Secondly, the 'national' in national democratic often dominates the 'democratic'. Since the Kuchmagate crisis, Yushchenko's and Our Ukraine's

nationalism (i.e., defined as support for the Ukrainian state, including its head, the president) has often overridden their support for democracy.

During the Kuchmagate crisis [sparked by the release of secretly bugged recordings allegedly implicating Kuchma in the murder of opposition journalist Georgi Gongadze], president Leonid Kuchma was saved from having to resign by Yushchenko and the national democrats, who did not support the demands of BYUT and the Socialists (SPU) for Kuchma's impeachment.

In February 2001, as opposition to president Kuchma mounted and street protests grew in size, Yushchenko signed an infamous open letter (with Kuchma and his current National Security and Defence Council Secretary, Ivan Pliushch) attacking the Ukraine Without Kuchma protesters as 'fascists'.

Throughout the period 2002-2003, Yushchenko and Our Ukraine wavered between supporting the Arise Ukraine! protests organised by supporters of Yulia Tymoshenko and the Socialists and joining a pro-Kuchma, centrist parliamentary coalition.

Indeed, one wonders with hindsight if Yushchenko would have ever gone into 'opposition' if he had not been removed as prime minister in April 2001.

Therefore, Yushchenko's and Our Ukraine's continued wavering after both the 2006 and 2007 elections between either joining an Orange coalition or a grand coalition is part of a pattern that reflects dynamics which we have seen demonstrated over the past five years time and again.

SITTING ON THE IDEOLOGICAL FENCE

Viktor Yanukovych only returned to government in August 2006 (whose conflict with Yushchenko led, in turn, to pre-term elections) because of a multi-vector coalition negotiation strategy favoured by Yushchenko that imploded when the SPU defected from the Orange coalition to the Party of Regions.

In March-June 2006, Besmertnyi negotiated with BYUT and the SPU for an Orange coalition while Yekhanurov negotiated with the Party of Regions for a grand coalition.

Even after this misplaced strategy failed, Yushchenko and Our Ukraine continued to hold faith in a deal, leading to the August 2006 round table that only BYUT opposed.

It took Our Ukraine another two months to go into 'opposition', a further two months for Our Ukraine ministers to be removed from the Yanukovych government (they refused to resign from the government even though they were in 'opposition') and another two months for Our Ukraine to revive the Orange alliance with BYUT.

This meant that an entire year was wasted after the victory of Orange political forces in March 2006 to the re-creation of the Orange alliance in February 2007.

UNCOMPROMISING APPEAL OF YULIA

It is useful to contrast this continuous wavering and indecisiveness of Yushchenko and Our Ukraine with BYUT's consistent line since the Kuchmagate crisis of complete opposition to the Kuchma regime and its unwillingness to enter into any negotiations or coalition with the Party of Regions.

Is it any surprise that Ukrainian voters prefer a consistent policy (BYUT) to an indecisive one (Yushchenko and Our Ukraine)?

President Viktor Yushchenko adopted two policies during the 2007 elections. Unlike in 2006, he campaigned openly for the Our Ukraine-People's Self-Defence Bloc which earned him a reprimand from the Central Election Commission for not maintaining his neutrality.

His campaigning on OU-PSD's behalf probably did more harm than good as Yushchenko's low popularity translated into low voter support for the bloc.

Yushchenko also repeatedly stated that he supported only one coalition that he defined as 'democratic' (i.e. Orange). At a meeting in late September, Yushchenko said, 'I would like to stress that we have only one scenario - to form a democratic coalition. Full stop. There will be no other coalition'. A few days later, Yushchenko ruled out a grand coalition.

Following the elections Yushchenko confused everybody by calling upon three of the five political forces (BYUT, OU-PSD and Party of Regions) that had passed the 3% threshold necessary to enter parliament to begin negotiations on forming a coalition. Only agreement among these three forces, Yushchenko believed, would lead to political stability.

This is a canard and contradicted Yushchenko's statements during the election campaign. Ukraine is a stable country with a growing economy. There are no riots, protests or violent political attacks taking place in the country.

TYMOSHENKO'S TRIUMPH INSPIRES FEAR

Yushchenko's wavering over which coalition to support rests on the two factors analysed above that have been in place for the last six years together with a new factor brought in by this year's election results.

[3] The third and new factor is the decisive victory of BYUT in the elections. BYUT is the only one of the three original Orange forces to have gained a greater share of the votes (up by over 1.5 million on 2006 election results) and, crucially, has demonstrated that it is the only Orange force that can win votes in eastern and southern Ukraine.

In contrast, OU-PSD won the same number of votes as in 2006 but it won fewer oblasts (only one oblast in 2007 compared to four in 2006).

Support for BYUT, in contrast, has been on an upward trajectory since it first fought an election in 2002 (when it obtained 8%), rising to 23% last year and 32% this year. BYUT also reduced its gap with the Party of Regions from 10% last year to only 2% this year.

In a longer election campaign BYUT would probably have reached a par with the Party of Regions or even moved into first place (this year's campaign time was shorter than is customary for Ukrainian elections).

BYUT's victory is good and bad news for Yushchenko. It is good in that it saves the Orange Revolution and his own presidency. But it is bad in that it makes his presidency dependent on his good relations with BYUT.

Yushchenko can either go into the 2009 elections with Tymoshenko as prime

minister and win a second term or lose the competition for the Orange vote with Tymoshenko in the first round of those elections, thus failing to enter the second round.

Yushchenko can only defeat Yanukovych in a presidential election if he is backed by Tymoshenko.

However, Yulia would win the 2009 presidential elections if she stood as a candidate because central Ukraine ('Ukraine's Ohio'), where she is by far the most popular politician and BYUT the most popular force, decides the outcome of presidential elections (as seen in Kuchma's victory in 1994 and Yushchenko's victory in 2004).

Yushchenko's only chance of a second term is an alliance with Tymoshenko as prime minister. It is time for him to mature as a politician, put his head before his heart and accept this fact.

Dr. Taras Kuzio is a Research Associate at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University and President of the economic and political consultancy group, Kuzio Associates.

LINK: <http://www.businessukraine.com.ua/time-for-yushchenko-to-let-his>