



## **Hapless opposition unable to lead nation out of political wilderness**

Taras Kuzio

Taras Kuzio suggests a remedy to Ukraine's opposition: attract youth, admit mistakes, change leaders.

The opposition to President Viktor Yanukovich established a Committee in Defense of Ukraine on May 10 in the Writers Union. It all felt like *deja vu* – 1988 all over again, when the Writers Union launched the Ukrainian Popular Movement (Rukh), which pressed for national independence, in the same building.

It was also reminiscent of ex-President Leonid Kuchma's era when the opposition established a Front for National Salvation in February 2001. At that time, Yulia Tymoshenko was briefly imprisoned. Today, the ex-prime minister faces threats from the current authorities to revive corruption charges against her.

Has Ukraine really not moved on since 1988 or 2001?

Following numerous protest waves, the 2004 Orange Revolution and the largely ineffectual presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, Ukrainian society is in trouble. Relations between the country's political class and its citizens are depressed.

Ukrainians did not go to the elections this year with great expectations or enthusiasm, a very different atmosphere to the heady days of the Orange Revolution, which gave the nation hope for justice, change and a different relationship between ruling elites and citizens. All of the main candidates in the 2010 contest had negative ratings. Even the "new faces" -- Sergiy Tigipko, Arseniy Yatseniuk and Anatoliy Hrytsenko – had negative ratings.

Contrast this with 2004, when Yushchenko had high positive ratings and was seen as a new and clean candidate. Four million fewer Ukrainians voted on Feb. 7 than did so on Dec. 26, 2004.

Although in opposition for much of the last five years, Party of Regions leader Viktor Yanukovich received nearly a half-million fewer votes than he received on Dec. 26, 2004. He won the same 11 oblasts, became the first president to not be elected by 50 percent of voters and won by only 3.5 percentage points. This was hardly an outstanding victory considering the fact that Tymoshenko was an incumbent prime minister during the worst economic-financial crisis in decades.

Ukrainians have taken their revenge on politicians who have betrayed them, such as the Socialist Party, leader Oleksandr Moroz, who took the party from the Orange Revolution coalition to the Party of Regions and Communists in 2006. The Socialists failed to enter parliament in 2007. The same revenge by voters will be most likely taken against Volodymyr Lytvyn in the 2012 elections for betraying the democratic coalition in February.

Ukraine's journalists have immediately begun to protest against a return to censorship since Yanukovich's Feb. 25 inauguration. It took journalists at least a decade under Kuchma to rise up against "temnyky" – the presidential administration's instructions to television channels on how to cover the news.

Opposition is an indispensable component of democracy. However, the rhetoric that emanates from both sides of the political divide suggests neither understands this. After five years of political instability, the opposition forces to government are in a rut. They will not evolve into a powerful force for four reasons:

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- Ukrainian political leaders never undertake internal audits following election defeats. Party leaders are never replaced. Internal examination and leadership changes are indispensable in rebuilding trust with voters. But this requires both an honest discussion of mistakes and a greater sensitivity to opinion polls and public sensitivities;
- Young people, who do not remember the Soviet Union but see elements of that state being rebuilt, are not integrated into the opposition;
- Politicians need to outline alternatives, rather than just criticize authorities.

- When in opposition, Ukrainian politicians offer weak programs. The Party of Regions returned to power this year with no ready program.

Why?

The ideological amorphousness of post-Soviet political parties did not lead to the revival of European-style ideological divisions between left and right. Another factor is the weakness of intellectuals within all political parties. This, in turn, is a reflection of the weakness of political science as a discipline in Ukrainian universities. Well-researched books on current politics are nearly impossible to find in Kyiv's bookstores.

What should be done? Four steps come to mind:

Re-connect with voters: The opposition needs to re-establish trust with voters by encouraging internal debate and external transparency. If they do not, party members, civil society and the media should undertake it for them.

Work with young people. The old Rukh nationalists, who have a well-deserved place in contemporary Ukrainian history, will never be able to mobilize young people. The opposition has to understand that it will never become a powerful and energetic force without integrating young people and youth-oriented non-governmental organizations. The centrality of young people to popular movements was evident in the Ukraine Without Kuchma movement and the 2004 Orange Revolution.

Draw on intermediaries. Ukrainian diaspora groups, such the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, could be used as intermediaries to bring together divided opposition leaders. The launch of the Committee in Defense of Ukraine was ignored by Yushchenko, Vyacheslav Kyrylenko and Yatseniuk who, together with Hrytsenko, did not join the new opposition movement. Disunity permits the authorities to divide and rule.

Inject intellectual input. There are upwards of 30 North American and European political scientists with expertise on Ukraine and the post-communist world. Some of these political experts could be indispensable in providing intellectual gravitas for the opposition, assisting in drawing up alternative programs and organizing Western visits of opposition leaders and youth activists.

The bottom line: The opposition today is far weaker and divided than it was during Kuchma's second term in office, from 1999-2004, in the run-up to the Orange Revolution. There remains much to be done to rebuild Ukraine's opposition. It should be recognized that a strong opposition is essential to the nation to remain a democracy.

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