

DEJA VU IN UKRAINE

By Helen Chebanenko and Peter Rutland

Three years after the Orange Revolution, Ukraine is experiencing another Orange Revolution. The September 30th election will probably lead to the return to government of a coalition of the two pro-reform parties led by Yulia Timoshenko and President Viktor Yushchenko.

What happened to the giddy optimism of the demonstrators on the streets of Kiev in December 2004, who managed to reverse the results of a rigged election and brought a pro-reform government to power? Feuding between Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko and President Yushchenko led to her dismissal in September 2005 and her surprising replacement by the Moscow-friendly Viktor Yanukovich.

Three years and three elections since the Orange Revolution, Ukrainians have learned that it is not so easy to run a democracy. One problem is that Ukraine opted for a French-style system with both a directly-elected president and a parliament-based government. That opens the door to a clash of interests between the president and prime minister, of the sort which led to Timoshenko's dismissal.

A second problem is the choice of proportional representation as an electoral system. A US style first-past-the-post system encourages the formation of strong parties that converge on the "median voter" as they seek to win a majority. Proportional representation allows parties to form around blocs of interests across the political spectrum. They often serve as vehicles for the personal ambitions of their leaders, and there is no guarantee that they will cooperate to form lasting coalition governments.

Another drawback with PR is that it can give excessive influence to small parties that can act as a tie-breaker between equally balanced blocs. Dominique Arel of the University of Ottawa has calculated that if only 0.8% more voters had supported the Socialist party, they would have cleared the 3% threshold and won some seats in the parliament, and the Orange coalition would have won only 222 seats, four short of a majority.

Aside from these institutional questions, the real problems lie in the political culture of the newly-independent Ukrainian state. Instead of dealing directly with the economic and social needs of ordinary Ukrainians, politicians have resorted to conjuring up imaginary threats to distinguish themselves in the political marketplace. For one side, the enemy is Russia; for the other, it is NATO and the West. Speculative questions about the legal status of the Russian language and the future geopolitical position of Ukraine are used as effective instruments of electoral manipulation. The parties need frequent elections to sharpen their image and define their own identity. But by using this adversarial rhetoric, politicians have artificially generated and widened a division between the Eastern and Western regions. The real issues of most concern to ordinary voters, wages, inflation, social benefits, and the like, are common problems for residents of both regions. But they are not put front and centre of the electoral programs of the competing parties.

The polarizing nature of the electoral campaigns means that the party leaders are incapable of transcending their differences and working together once the election is over. In Ukraine, politics is treated as a zero-sum game: Timoshenko is already promising "criminal investigations" of the 2006 natural gas deal with Russia should she become prime minister.

Of the 15 post-Soviet states only the Baltic countries and Ukraine are rated as "free" by Freedom House, while Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova were rated as "partly free." The remaining eight are "unfree." So Ukrainians can be proud that they have established a functioning democracy. But until

politicians learn to put the interests of the nation above those of their own faction, it will continue to be a work in progress. Winston Churchill's famous adage still holds true: "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

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