

Juri Durkot: 'Cold War', Ukrainian Style. The Power Struggle in Ukraine Escalates

The dream of the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine is over – when Viktor Yanukovich was appointed Prime Minister of the country in August 2006, this symbolised the comeback of the old forces. The Party of Regions ruthlessly tries to expand its regained power. The opposition, on the other hand, is at loggerheads; the Our Ukraine party led by President Viktor Yushchenko is in a crisis.

The government coalition consisting of the Party of Regions, the socialists, and the communists, which was enabled by the socialists' change of allegiance in July, constitutes a bitter blow to Ukrainian democracy. Meanwhile, the Party of Regions endeavours to position itself in the political centre and to present Mr Yushchenko as a head of state who no longer is the man who once promised a new start. As a matter of fact, there are many voters in the country who support the position of the Party of Regions. From the parliamentary elections of March 2006, it emerged as the strongest party and claimed the right to form the government with good reason, although the orange forces still held the majority.

The Party of Regions is certainly not a democratic party. Although it cannot but be interested in close relations with the West, it ran an election campaign based on clearly anti-Western slogans directed against NATO. This, however, is a question of its own programmatic values. The party is undemocratic because it did not distance itself from the electoral frauds of 2004, fielding numerous politicians in the latest contest who are under immediate suspicion of being responsible for exactly those frauds.

Among the other problems of the Party of Regions is not only the fact that it primarily represents the interests of the big capitalists in the East, and that it is mainly rooted in the region of Donetsk, but also its unconventional understanding of liberality: To the party, the idea of liberality does not imply advocating equal competition conditions to all enterprises but supporting the expansion of its own clientele among the big companies. The fact that the Party of Regions refunded value-added tax first and foremost to companies in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as well as in the Crimea even caused Mr Yushchenko to speak of a criminalisation of this tax. The imposition of export quotas on grain, which constituted an administrative intervention that was hostile to the market, triggered criticism from the World Bank and the German advisory group to the Ukrainian government. What is more, the budget draft for 2007 also allows numerous manipulations of public funds.

However, the Party of Regions not only constitutes the institution on which the big capitalists and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts pin their hopes; it is also considered an agency for the interests of the Ukrainian East and South as a whole, where the voters used to support the communists. The majority of them voted for the Party of Regions even in March 2006. The anti-American emotions stirred up by the Party, its agitation against NATO, and the instrumentalisation of the Russian language issue certainly made their own contribution.

It is a fact that in most Central European states, initial democratic governments were voted out of office shortly after the transformation, and the post-communists came into power. Societal changes, however, had by then gone so far that democracy itself was no longer in serious danger. In Ukraine, on the other hand, where neither society nor the party have changed, things were and still are different: The 'point of no return' was never reached, and the danger of setbacks still exists. Since its recent rise, the Party of Regions has been endeavouring to secure its own terrain. Thus, numerous ministerial posts were filled with people who had been in office in Mr Kuchma's time but had not acquired the best of reputations then.

The coalition was established by President Yushchenko himself. With his 'universal goal of national unity', however, he also set the framework for the policy of the new government – a compromise which was signed by all parties, the only exception being the Timoshenko electoral bloc. However, today it seems clear that the Party of Regions does not feel bound by this compromise: Step by step, Mr Yanukovich is trying to take over control in diverse areas, to ignore the decrees of the president, and to deprive the representatives of the democratic forces – such as Mr Tarasyuk, the foreign minister, and Mr Lutsenko, the minister of domestic affairs – of their power through a no-confidence vote.

The violent advance of the Party of Regions clearly illustrates how weak the president is, having lost not only his influence on the formation of the government but also his control over the intelligence services. The only tool to influence politics left to him now is his power of veto, which prevents the Party of Regions from circumventing the president. At best, both sides will hamstring each other, a situation which hardly benefits a country in which, because of its lack of democratic legal traditions, every redistribution of power automatically leads to a crisis, and there are many political actors who are not willing to go by the logic of law.

The president's weakness, however, is based on yet another factor. While Mr Kuchma was able to draw on the large toolkit of an authoritarian system and, even more so, on blackmail to stabilise his rule, Mr Yushchenko deliberately abandoned the mechanisms of authoritarianism – at a time when democratic mechanisms were not yet established. Today, the president is on his own in his fight against the government and the Party of Regions. Having tried to position his own party in the centre without involving the citizens themselves in the process of party formation, the grass-roots level of his party is now in a desolate situation. Today, the strongest orange force is paralysed by faction fights, so that the main task of Viktor Baloha, who was elected chairman on December 7, is to reorganise Our Ukraine as a party.

There have been discussions about new elections in Ukraine for many weeks. If it should come to that, Mr Yushchenko will need to obtain a new stable position for his party, to save it from descending into insignificance. If, on the other hand, it should not come to new elections, a fresh start might be the last chance for Our Ukraine anyway.

What is also being discussed in the country is the option of revoking the constitutional reform after the compromise adopted at the end of 2004 proved unconstitutional. Both opposition parties – the Timoshenko electoral bloc and Our Ukraine – announced their intention to file complaints. For them, it would be best if the constitutional reform was declared void and the old constitution restored. To revoke the constitutional reform, the president would most certainly need good legal advisers.

To sum up, the following may be said about developments in Ukraine: 1) In the short run, there is hardly any reason for viewing things optimistically. Both political camps are entangled in fights for their respective positions which render further reforms almost impossible. 2) In view of the current situation, new elections are unrealistic, as the coalition is going to stick together. The smaller coalition partners do not have an alternative, anyway, since new elections would mean their political demise. 3) Not only the opposition but the entire society of the country need to act now. Nobody can predict whether the country will be threatened by a slow reduction of democratic liberties or whether democracy in Ukraine will be able to consolidate itself. 4) The West is under an obligation as well. When the eastern Ukrainian elites speak of their interest in cooperating closer with the EU, they are not paying lip service: The West is the only partner who may provide the capital needed to modernise the country's antiquated heavy industry. 5) Finally,

the West could make an important contribution towards the formation of new elites. What is urgently needed is a kind of Marshall Plan for the education sector which, however, requires not only funding but also political willpower. Even so, such a plan might be the most sensible investment into a common European future.