

Yuri Durkot: Another Chance for the Orange Camp? One more Change of Government after Early Parliamentary Elections in Ukraine

Not even eighteen months had passed since the last parliamentary elections in Ukraine when the parliament and the president of this east European country agreed on new elections. The key data, however, have hardly changed: As the opposing 'Orange' and 'Blue' parties are of almost the same strength, the campaign turned into another fight between two entrenched camps. In this, both sides largely concentrated on their old teams – the Orange camp with the Yulia Tymoshenko Block (BYT) and Nasha Ukraina-People's Self Defence (NUNS) under president Yushchenko on the one hand, and the Blue camp with the Party of Regions (PR) of Viktor Yanukovich, the head of government, the communists, and the socialists who had changed sides on the other. What is noteworthy is that the Orange camp succeeded in catching almost all splinter parties.

Thus, the bitterly-fought election campaign was marked by disparagements of the political opponent, while sensitive subjects such as the accession to NATO and the introduction of Russian as the second foreign language took a back seat. Instead, social issues were discussed, such as increases in child allowances, scholarships, pensions, and minimum wages, the financing of social housing, the repayment of frozen savings from Soviet times, and improved funding in the fields of science, medicine, and agriculture. What has to be mentioned in this context, however, is that presumably none of the parties had seriously addressed the question of who is to finance these opulent pre-election promises. After all, economic experts predict that even the attempt to finance only part of them would endanger the country's economic equilibrium.

In the future, Ukraine's parliament will consist of five political parties and/or alliances. Next to the three big parties led by Mrs Tymoshenko, Mr Yushchenko, and Mr Yanukovich, two smaller political parties, the communists and the block of the former parliamentary speaker, Mr Lytvyn, will enter the Verkhovna Rada in Kiev. The pro-Western forces, i.e. the Yulia Tymoshenko Block and Nasha Ukraina, will hold a narrow majority of 228 in a parliament of 450 seats.

Winning 34.3 percent of the vote, Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions emerged from the elections as the strongest single force. Compared to 2006, it was able to increase its share slightly. It remained victorious in nine oblasts and in Sevastopol, and even succeeded in gaining votes in the Orange-dominated regions. At the same time, however, the PR is a big loser which, now relegated to the opposition role, suffered losses in its own strongholds, i.e. in the oblasts situated in the eastern and southern parts of the country. Some protest voters had run over to the Orange camp – not least because of the political scandals in which PR politicians such as the lord mayor of Kharkiv were involved.

This time, it was the Orange camp that was able to mobilise its supporters particularly well. Especially Yulia Tymoshenko, who may be regarded as the winner of the elections, did surprisingly well. She benefited from almost all those voters who, until shortly before the poll, were still undecided and wavering between the two blocks of the Orange camp. However, many protest voters positioned to the right of the political centre also placed their trust in Mrs Tymoshenko, although she belongs to the centre-left. And finally, there were the socialist protest voters who had not forgiven the socialists' recent swing from Orange to Blue. Strengthened by its success, the Tymoshenko Block now regards itself as a political force which is increasingly perceived in all regions of the country.

At somewhat more than 14 percent, Mr Yushchenko's party, Nasha Ukraina-People's Self Defence, remained at roughly the same level it had eked out in 2006. The communists and the Lytvyn Bloc both won around 300,000 new votes. To sum up, extremist left- and right-wing parties apparently hardly play a role in Ukraine's political sphere even now.

But what will happen next? While it is true that the Orange camp won a narrow victory, this hardly changes the balance of power within the country. The confrontation of two antagonistic camps of almost the same strength is not an easy problem for the new government, especially as the Party of Regions is in a position to block many of its plans. Without a majority worth mentioning, the Orange government, to which there is no logical alternative, must look around for potential partners to meet this situation. The only option, if any, would be the Lytvyn Bloc, a party led by Volodymyr Lytvyn which, regarding itself as centrist although it has no political programme, may no longer present itself as the kingmaker, as it did in 2006.

Stronger than ever, Yulia Tymoshenko may now hope for the office of prime minister. Her block will dominate the Orange camp in the future, a prospect about which Nasha Ukraina will hardly be happy. However, the latter party must accept this, especially as it has ruled out forming a coalition with the Party of Regions.

Viktor Yushchenko's position is by no means an easy one. To be re-elected in 2009 he must prevail over two opponents – Mrs Tymoshenko and Mr Yanukovich. At first, he will probably try to win back part of the powers he lost: An amended version of the controversial cabinet act which deprived the president of some of his power is to be adopted in the near future. Next, Mr Yushchenko will endeavour to obtain a reform of the constitution, hoping to strengthen the office of president.

Apart from the traditional conflict between the head of government and the president, a coalition of Mrs Tymoshenko's and Mr Yushchenko's parties harbours some conflict potential. Only in foreign-policy issues do the two forces agree, as they both favour the country's accession to NATO and the EU. When it comes to economic and political questions, on the other hand, all signs are pointing towards confrontation.

The elections of the president of parliament and the prime minister could already turn into an acid test for potential coalition partners who do not trust each other too much. Moreover, the debate about the date on which the country's armed forces should be transformed into a professional army – a step supported by both sides in principle – and about the repayment of savings from Soviet times will very likely bring about a quarrel. Especially in the latter case, it would be useful to clarify the legal position of Russia. In concrete terms, this means that the question would have to be resolved whether the existing liabilities of the Soviet Sberbank should really be regarded as a national debt of the Ukraine or whether Russia as the legal successor of the Soviet Union should be responsible for these debts. And there is another issue that would have to be solved with Moscow – the gas prices.

At the moment, it is not to be expected that Ukraine will get the numerous pending reforms under way any time soon and resolutely move towards democracy. The difficult economic situation speaks against it, as does the politicians' general unwillingness to form a consensus on the basis of national interests. The chance for a big throw that had opened up after the Orange Revolution of 2004 has irrevocably been wasted. However, what has remained is the option of smaller but successful steps forward.

To be sure, the recent parliamentary elections have not changed the balance of power in Ukraine fundamentally, but they have confirmed several important tendencies which have been observed in the country's society for some time now. First, the recent parliamentary elections were the second free and democratic elections to be held within the last two years. Second, the fact that these early elections were commonly agreed upon shows that a search for compromise between the political camps in essential questions is possible if needed. Third, thinking in camp categories and the consequent decline in the importance of the smaller parties are still characteristic of Ukrainian politics. Fourth, the dividing lines in the country's political spectrum are determined not by philosophies but by regions. Fifth, all three big parties are a mixture of ideological groups, stakeholder clubs, and regionally committed associations. Sixth, the three parties do differ from each other in their organisation and their structures of administration. And seventh, the ever-sharper competition increasingly forces the parties to move closer to the voter and to pursue a strategy of making promises to certain target groups. Especially the latter, however, has encouraged a social populism of hitherto unknown dimensions which constitutes a threat to the country's economic development as a whole.