

UKRAINE: BLUE CHALLENGES

After the Ukrainian presidential elections, Victor Yanukovich's "blue" team came to power. The defragmented "orange" camp has now been pushed to the opposition. Although the potential of the Orange Revolution was not fully utilized, its legacy still remains. The objection by the old member states, along with the Western fear of Kremlin's reaction, eliminated the use of the best "carrot", which has so far worked well in accelerating the transformation of Central European countries, i.e., the offer of EU membership. The internal reasons for such objections are a lack of consensus between the main political factions in Ukraine, corruption, stagnation and suspension of necessary reforms which have resulted in the birth of the "Ukrainian fatigue" syndrome of the West. On the other hand, the parallel syndrome of an "EU fatigue" has increased Ukraine's frustration resulted in awarding munitions to the supporters of the "pragmatic" approach that is advocated by the Party of Regions.

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There is a huge contrast between the scenes from the time of the Orange Revolution, when the crowds in Maydan enthusiastically applauded Victor Andriyovych Yushchenko as a victorious challenger of a repeated election (due to fraud), and results of the first round of the last election on 17 January 2010.

In the re-vote of December 2004, he received 52 percent of the votes. However this time, gaining only 5.45 percent of the votes disqualified him from the second round. As a result, the winner of the 2010 presidential race in Ukraine was Victor Fedorovych Yanukovych, the leader of the “Blue” Party of Regions, who was beaten by the “Orange Revolution” coalition in the elections five years ago. Yanukovych’s voters believed that he would be the one to finally bring order and stability to Ukraine.

Yanukovych represents the Russian speaking region of Donetsk and comes from a pro-Soviet background. At the time of the presidential election in 2004 he was supported by the Kremlin, and President Putin congratulated him twice for winning the election. Previously, he was perceived as the puppet of the Kremlin, however, after his victory over Yulia Tymoshenko, the situation changed. Ukraine is not the same country and the Russian Federation is not what it used to be. Primarily, Ukraine has managed to develop a solid foundation for a democratic system with a vibrant civil society, while Russia has gone in the opposite direction, strengthening central power and limiting individual freedom. The oligarchic group Yanukovych represents is no longer interested in being subordinate to Moscow, which treats the new Ukrainian president with a dose of distrust and skepticism. At the moment, it is difficult to understand what kind of a game these countries are playing.

Ukrainians have blamed Yushchenko for being a weak and unprofessional politician. He bears the guilt of political instability and corruption, and is deemed responsible for exacerbating the economic crisis. In common jokes, he is described as someone with only the knowledge of bee-keeping and historical knowledge of the Cossacks. Obviously, Victor Yushchenko, did not meet the expectations vocalized in the Orange Revolution, and became hostage to his own overwhelming victory. The same had happened to Lech Walesa, the leader of Solidarity, the Polish opposition movement, who lost the presidential election in 1995 to Aleksander Kwasniewski, the leader of the post-Communist party. The Orange Revolution’s ruling coalition faced a dramatic internal division, similar to that

of the Solidarity movement in Poland. There is a pattern of splitting and defragmenting victorious pro-democratic movements in Central and Eastern European countries.

Blaming only Yushchenko is the easiest way to deal with the frustration caused by the turmoil of transformation and economic crisis. But we must agree that his presidency confirmed Ukraine's dedication to the democratic values praised during the Orange Revolution. Yushchenko did not drift in the direction of dictatorship, although he confronted some of the Orange Coalition members and dissolved parliament twice. He was not consistent with his political decisions. In spite of promises he did not separate himself completely from his predecessor's past. And he failed to investigate cases opened during Kuchma's presidency; this included cases of excessive privatization, the murder of the opposition journalist, Georgyi Gongadze, and an assassination attempt through dioxin poisoning aimed at Yushchenko himself in 2004.

During his term, Ukraine began its not entirely successful romance with the European Union and NATO, while at the same time liberalizing the media and taking steps to construct a stronger civil society. The middle class burgeoned and a free market economy was established, Yushchenko did not manage to combat corruption, so it could be argued that the process which started with the Orange Revolution is yet to be completed. The constitutional division of power pushed him into an ongoing battle with the government and its parliament, causing an overwhelming feeling of frustration among Ukrainians. But at the same time, under his presidency, Ukraine became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which has tied Kyiv to the Western economy. After the Orange Revolution, Ukrainians became enthusiastically interested in traveling westward, and tourists as well as western investors found the country of the Dnepr River very attractive. However, disappointment came soon after the expansion of the Schengen visa regime to the Central European states.

Yushchenko's efforts to strengthen the Ukrainian position in the Black Sea region and to build a coalition of countries which could support democracy and balance the Russian influence have failed. (These were the Community of Democratic Choice and the revitalization of the GUAM initiative, respectively.) Although he understood the importance of a strategic partnership with Turkey, he had no executive capacity with which to implement his ideas. His efforts to join NATO also failed due to resistance from the governments of Berlin and Paris. In

the Alliance's Bucharest Summit held in April 2008, the Ukrainian and Georgian applications for MAP (Membership Action Plan), were rejected, even though it was stated that gateways for applications would be left open to these countries in the future. Yushchenko's partner and personal friend, Georgian president Michael Saakashvili, faced growing opposition in his country, followed by the invasion of Georgia by Russian troops under the pretext of retaking Tskhinvali in August 2008. These events obstructed NATO's expansion to the East for the time being and allowed Moscow to display its proactive role in the region, which eventually left other countries playing the role of the reactive follower. At this point, Ukrainian-Russian relations reached a level of great tension. Yushchenko demanded the withdrawal of the Russian Black Sea Fleet from the Crimean port of Sevastopol by 2017 and accused Moscow of distributing Russian passports to the inhabitants of Crimea.

Yushchenko will probably be remembered as the founding father of the modern Ukrainian identity. Not having enough courage and parliamentary support to launch fundamental reforms, he concentrated on the history and process of building up a national identity. As a reference point he has chosen different moments in Ukrainian history; promoting the ancient Trypillya culture, through Cossacks Hhetmanate's state, loss of the Russians Poltava battle, to Semen Petlura's 1919-1920 war of independence, 1932-1933 Holodomor (artificial famine in the then-USSR) and OUN national movement lead by Stefan Bandera. His conceptualization of a nation was based on the values that are not commonly shared by the Russian speaking and Soviet influenced Eastern Ukraine. Under his presidency, the Ukrainian language became more widely spoken and was legitimized as the only official language of the state.

He paid the price of being a democratic president and was confronted by challenges he simply could not overcome. He was not a charismatic man with a strategic vision. With a background in accounting and finance, he failed to accurately calculate the global political challenges and to lead his country in a difficult time of transformation and crisis. Paradoxically, his term in the office paved the way for his old rival Victor Yanukovich, whose manipulation of the voting results had caused the Orange Revolution; this time the results were that of a fair and democratic election with victory for Yanukovich.

The potential of the Orange Revolution was not fully utilized due to internal and external reasons. The "old" EU member states' objections, along with the

Western fear of the Kremlin's reaction, eliminated the use of the best "carrot" tactic which has so far worked well in accelerating the transformation of Central European countries i.e. the offer of EU membership. Instead, the EU proposed to Ukraine and other non-European states a new instrument called the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Kyiv's reaction was disappointment and frustration: Ukrainians considered themselves not as neighbors of Europe, but as a European nation itself. Although Ukraine accepted funding from the ENPI (The European Neighborhood Policy Instrument) there was no information about the content of this EU assistance within Ukraine. Even the staff of the Ukrainian government agencies did not know what part of their budget was coming from ENPI funds since the monitoring mechanism was weak and not transparent. Such an approach did not stimulate a genuine drive for modernizing the country.

The internal reasons for such objections are a lack of consensus between the main political factions in Ukraine, corruption, stagnation and suspension of necessary reforms which have resulted in the birth of the "Ukrainian fatigue" syndrome of the West. On the other hand, the parallel syndrome of an "EU fatigue" has increased Ukraine's frustration, and resulted in awarding munitions to the supporters of the "pragmatic" approach that is advocated by the Party of Regions.

Following these developments, the Eastern Partnership, (EaP) was founded on 23 May 2008. Polish diplomacy secured support of Stockholm for proposing a kind of "upgrading of the ENP" (European Neighborhood Policy) to Brussels. Soon afterwards, the events in Georgia demonstrated the weaknesses of the ENP so that new ideas were needed to strengthen the EU offers in the Eastern context. The EaP covers 27 EU countries and six Eastern partners that are embraced by the ENP: Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Belarus. Ukraine has welcomed this new initiative, finding it more convincing and attractive. It is important to stress that Brussels also invited NGOs to form an EaP Civic Forum consisting of EU and EaP partners. However, the launching of the EaP initiative raised skeptical views from Russia. The Kremlin claims that the EaP is aimed at undermining Russian interests in the region defined by Moscow as the "close neighborhood".

In spite of the "Ukrainian fatigue" in the EU and the "EU fatigue" in Ukraine, Kyiv continues negotiations with Brussels in the context of the Association and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement (DCFTA). The first official

visit President Yanukovych made to Brussels ended up with the cancellation of his previous plan to meet the Russian leaders in Moscow. This shows that ties with the EU and access to available funding from the EU is the number one priority for the new Kyiv administration. Yanukovych's declaration of the neutral status of his country met with enthusiastic responses from most of the "old" EU member states, and his "pragmatic approach" won the hearts of those in Berlin, Paris, and Brussels. Washington, on the other hand, was busy working on its strategy for dealing with Afghanistan and the situation in the Middle East, and did not respond with the same enthusiasm.

News concerning the formation of the new majority government in Kyiv and its close cooperation with the president have cemented hopes in the West that Ukraine would restore stability and start moving in the desired direction, thereby not antagonizing its Eastern neighbor. The structure of this current government shows that its focus will be on the economy. Ukraine needs drastic reforms in order to reset its cooperation with the International Monetary Fund and secure access to Western funds. It could be argued that this cabinet will follow a similar policy to that of Kuchma's: a two vector approach consisting of cooperation with Russia and Western democracies. Such a concept will meet expectations of the politicians from the big EU member states, curing the allergy caused by Ukrainian membership requests. Azarov's cabinet will continue talks with Moscow on renegotiating gas contracts and securing access to Western funds, rather than completing the negotiations on the DCFTA Agreement. This policy, if effective, can in fact pave the way for preparing a more solid ground for Ukraine's EU membership prospect. But the issue of fighting widespread corruption does not seem to be a priority for Yanukovych's people. His cabinet will continue a tradition of oligarchic bureaucratic administration and will defend its vital interests.

Some commentators argue that Yanukovych's position resembles that of Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko, the authoritarian leader of Belarus who is successfully "balancing" the EU and Russia. But the position of the Ukrainian leader remains less comfortable. If he makes any anti-democratic steps, he might be confronted by a powerful opposition group led by Yulia Tymoshenko and resistance from the well-developed civil society, a test that could come in the near future. The potential for a new political crisis remains. The president's mandate is weak, and the new coalition's base looks fragile.