

The ill-considered constitutional reform in 2004; corruption; the political culture inherited from the USSR. In the judgment of the President of Ukraine, these are the reasons for the country's latest and extremely

Viktor Yushchenko: “my Ukraine”

POLITICS

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serious crisis. But there's no imminent danger of a split. Europe and the WTO are still political objectives, but the most momentous objective is still a new constitution.

When, in August last year, President Yushchenko called upon his former rival, Viktor Yanukovich, to form a broad coalition government including Nasha Ukrayina, the Socialists and the Party of Regions, most political observers agreed that any executive resulting from the astonishing compromise between political factions with diametrically opposed views on the country's future would be short-lived.

As indeed it was. From October 2006, when Yushchenko's party, Nasha Ukrayina, took to the opposition benches, the conflict between Parliament and the President gradually deteriorated, until the final escalation at the end of March.

Monday, April 2. After a tumultuous weekend, when the opposition led by Yulia Tymoshenko took to the streets to demonstrate their solidarity with the President - who had accused the government of anti-constitutional behaviour - Yushchenko dissolved Parliament and announced new elections to be held on May 27. But the decree dissolving the Verkhovna Rada was contested by the Prime Minister and submitted to the scrutiny of the Constitutional Court for a pronouncement as to its legitimacy.

Then, with the solution to the grave crisis

seemingly now in the hands of the Court, on May 4 there came the unexpected announcement of an agreement between Yushchenko and Yanukovich.

The understanding, reached *in extremis* a few days before the Court was to issue its pronouncement (following increasingly loud rumours in the preceding weeks of alleged attempts to corrupt the judges), seems to place the solution to the crisis entirely in the hands of the politicians. Despite the fact that the terms of the agreement are unclear, the President and Prime Minister announced to the press that there would soon be a new election. But the matter did not end there. Just 20 days after the first agreement, on Thursday, 24 May, the situation again came to a head when it was learned that Yushchenko had dismissed the Attorney General, Svyatoslav Piskun, accusing him of accepting his new post without resigning as a member of parliament and of failing to ratify the presidential decree concerning the early elections.

The President's decision was rapidly censured by all the pro-government factions. The Interior Minister, Vasyl Tsushko, who is on the Prime Minister's side, went as far as to speak of a *coup d'état* and sent the forces of order to guard Piskun's office.



In no way intimidated by this show of force, the President replied to Tsushko's move by putting the Ministry of Defence's special forces on alert. While, on Saturday, 26 May, the members of the anti-terrorist squads were converging on Kiev – officially to protect the inhabitants and the government offices and a few scattered encounters did occur between soldiers and traffic police near the checkpoints – in the capital Yushchenko and Yanukovych were once more sitting at a difficult negotiating table.

On the morning of 27 May, the President and Prime Minister made a joint announcement. Ukraine would go to the polls again on 30 September, thus staving off the spectre of civil war.

A few days before the agreement, the Ukrainian President had granted the following long, exclusive interview to **east**, in which he analysed the causes of the serious conflict taking place within his country's political institutions and spoke at length about crucial matters such as the alleged split between East and West Ukraine, and the search for a Memorandum of Understanding with the EU with a view to future membership.

Mr. President, in recent weeks almost the whole of the foreign press has been following the news from Ukraine. What's going on in your country? In your opinion, what are the reasons for the serious crisis in your political institutions that has set the Executive and Parliament at odds?

The political crisis in Ukraine over the last few months results from several contributory factors.

In the first place, the ill-considered and mistaken constitutional reform launched in 2004. That reform – as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also took steps to point out – ended by destroying the balance which existed between the country's various branches of power.

Secondly, political corruption and the systematic violation of the Constitution and national legislation.

It has come to the point when politicians were turning practices such as betrayal, corruption and law-breaking into normal daily occurrences.

In third place, the political culture inherited from the Soviet era. Ukraine's political class has not yet learned to think in terms of 'national

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categories' and to find balanced solutions. Out of loyalty to my Presidential oath and to the dictates of the Constitutional Charter, I assumed responsibility for terminating these dangerous processes of corruption, both inside Parliament and in the wider political sphere.

I am sure that the decision to call for early parliamentary elections will give Ukraine an opportunity for political stability. This is the only consistent and democratic method to find a way out of the political crisis.

In 2004 the nation went through a phase of “self-purification”, which gave it the strength to build a new State.

Now the time has come for the political system to do the same thing. Values such as honesty and moral integrity must once more play a fundamental role in Ukrainian politics.

Bearing in mind this crisis, how do you judge your choice this summer to give Viktor Yanukovych, your rival in the 2004 presidential elections, the mandate to form an executive? Might it not have been more appropriate to form a new Orange Executive in order to further a policy of reform? It's always easier to judge something in



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_The recent crisis in Ukraine officially began with the public protests, followed on 2 April by Yushchenko dissolving Parliament, a decision that was contested by Prime Minister Yanukovich

hindsight, especially when the facts clearly show the negative implications of a certain decision.

But what's done is done.

I am sure that the whole country would have benefited from the creation of a new "orange" government as the people wanted.

Unfortunately, the Socialist Party's unexpected change of position, which was contrary to the agreements made earlier in respect of forming a democratic coalition, made the idea come to nothing. The start of all the current problems really dates back to the moment when the Socialists crossed over to the other alliance. Furthermore, the President cannot appoint the government independently.

It is his task to propose the candidate chosen by the coalition that holds the parliamentary majority. That's another distinctive feature of the new constitution. The President has no power of veto over candidates yet he must undertake to propose them to Parliament. So

the President had only two possible choices: to dissolve Parliament or approve the candidature of Viktor Yanukovich.

The difficulty of each situation stems from its particular circumstances.

In August 2006 the appointment of Viktor Yanukovich to the post of Prime Minister seemed the lesser ill and the best way out of the political impasse which had arisen following the parliamentary election in March. All the other solutions were simply too abstract. To use political terminology, we could say that no alternative solutions were "ripe". The country had just come out of a long electoral campaign and it was tired. The people wanted stability. Ukraine was trying to bring about a constructive dialogue between her political factions for the sake of the prosperity of all Ukrainian citizens.

Now, we know that the new coalition and the Yanukovich-led executive failed to achieve this objective and to guarantee the State stable development. On the contrary, exploiting the nation's real priorities for its own ends, it began to sabotage everything done by the Head of State and to stonewall the opposition.

With the attitude it has assumed over the last few months, the coalition has demonstrated

that its sole objective was to hold onto power. What do I regret most? The time lost for constructive national development and the potential waste of opportunity for a united country. On the other hand, the people can now make a proper judgment of what the political factions in the present government are doing and make their conclusions felt through their votes in the early election.

As you yourself pointed out, one of the main reasons that prompted you to agree to the formation of a Grand Coalition between the Socialists, the Party of Regions and Nasha Ukrayina in August was the desire to unite East and West Ukraine. Does it seem to you that Yanukovych's executive has been working toward this end or not? Now, in May 2007, do you see your country as more united or more divided compared to a few months ago?

There is no compelling need to unite the East and West of the country. Ukraine is not the only country in the world with strong regional differences. In that,

we are similar to Italy and Spain.

As Head of State, the guarantor of citizens' rights and liberty, I want to assure you that there is no split at all in Ukraine.

All the talk on the subject is pure speculation. There are some politicians who find it useful to raise the spectre of division in a demagogical and populist fashion purely to maintain their popularity by diverting society's attention away from the country's current problems and their solutions.

When I signed the decree for national unity I was trying to unite the politicians around some core values on behalf and for the sake of the country.

Nine months of work by Viktor Yanukovych's government have clearly shown that despite accepting the terms of the Decree the "Party of Regions" and the Socialists only wanted to achieve power. The defence of national interests has not become their main goal in life.

The parliamentary elections last year showed that a party like the Tymoshenko Bloc was



capable of finding support both in the West and in the large industrial cities in the East, such as Dnipropetrovsk. In the light of this, don't you think that to some extent the East-West division so many politicians talk about is the reflection of an old idea that civil society and the electorate have already forgotten? That said, what else needs to be done to unite the country?

Again, I repeat that there is absolutely no risk of a split in Ukraine. The politicians must prove that they have wisdom and a sense of responsibility and, once and for all, stop raising issues that provoke ambiguous and disturbing reactions among society. On the contrary, we need to concentrate as soon as possible on matters that unite the

country, like Ukraine's future in Europe, education, science, youth issues, national culture and the development of the democratic institutions. And to work together for the welfare of the citizens.

As President, I have done and will do everything to react against those political factions that want to manipulate public opinion simply to trigger disputes within the country.

If you look closely, not all that much is needed to achieve stability. The political factions have to stop yearning for power and start to focus on the real needs of the people. That doesn't mean to be "populist" but, for example, committing themselves completely to seeing through strategic programmes which would implement far-reaching reforms throughout the whole machinery of state.

If the political factions can achieve cohesion by concentrating on Ukraine's national interests, the question of separation will vanish by itself. And a new identity for Ukrainians will begin to take shape.

_The opposition which took to the streets at the end of March to demonstrate their solidarity with the President - who had accused the government of anti-constitutional behaviour - was led by Yulia Tymoshenko, here pictured with Yushchenko



To return to issues of national unity: some people think that Luzhkov, the Mayor of Moscow's, continual declarations about the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation are dangerous and destabilising and that they represent undue interference by the Russians in the internal affairs of an independent State...

Those declarations do not represent the Russian Federation's official position. We are well aware of that and that is why we do not take low- and mid-ranking Russian politicians seriously when they try to toy with our emotions in this way. Thanks to the joint efforts of their two Presidents, Russia and Ukraine are gradually ridding themselves of their old ideological stereotypes, so declarations of this kind tend to lead to a certain inconsistency with regard to these positive changes. They leave us, so to speak, with a bitter taste in our mouths. The Russian politicians have to understand that their declarations do nothing whatsoever to help establish good relationships – as they often like to say – between "brother peoples".

The present Ukrainian Constitution gives the President the mandate to make several crucially important ministerial appointments, such as the Interior Ministry, Defence and the Foreign Office. With this legislative framework, how was it possible for the Yanukovich government to remove the Foreign Office Minister, Borys Tarasiuk, from office?

As you quite rightly said, the appointments to the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office are part of the "President's share" of the Government.

Parliament must not choose who to appoint or dismiss within that share. But in this case we have another example where the constitution modified in 2004 does not make clear provision for all aspects of the way the State mechanism works. A number of political influences, despite the principles of common sense, tried to interpret certain regulations to their own advantage.

It was the Constitutional Court's duty to resolve the controversies as to how the law should be interpreted. But for some incomprehensible reason, the Court has not sat for the last 8 months.

All the actions taken in December 2006 by the Head of State and his coalition in connection with the "sacking of the minister" happened in clear violation of the

law and the President did not accept them. At the same time, as a responsible politician, Borys Tarasiuk decided to resign voluntarily to protect the positive image of Ukraine in the world. An image the coalition was trying to damage at all costs. So, on 30 January, the President agreed to his request.

Is joining the EU and the WTO still a priority for Ukraine's foreign policy?

Of course. Membership of the EU and the World Trade Organisation are still strategic objectives of our foreign policy. We have never ceased working to that effect.

Right now, we are negotiating with the European Union to sign a new basic accord between Ukraine and the EU to replace the existing one, an agreement on partnership and co-operation that will become the basis of our future relations, starting from next year. I hope we can manage to formulate the document in the very near future. That would be a real leap forward in the quality of our relations and would create the conditions necessary for political and economic integration. At this stage we are deliberately avoiding the subject of immediate membership of the EU. That will take time, especially when we consider the bunch of problems facing the European Union. However, I would like to stress that our fundamental strategic objective is indeed membership of the EU. On that issue, there's a consensus of opinion among the Ukrainian people.

We are sorry that so far the EU has been unwilling to take any important steps toward Ukraine and has practically given us to understand that we are not awaited with open arms.

We are sorry, because there are many issues where we could be of help to each other.

For example, energy safety, which is presently one of the European Community's most important issues.

Together, we could defend our interests more easily.

As for membership of the WTO, there are some positive results.

We have signed bilateral protocols for reciprocal access to the markets for goods and services with all the member countries of the WTO working group, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan. The exception is due to Kyrgyzstan's current internal political situation. Nevertheless, our negotiations with



_Moscow mayor Luzhkov has recently been one of the foremost to issue proclamations about Crimea's annexation to the Russian Federation, a move perceived by as destabilizing by Ukraine, which is trying to move away from the ideological stereotypes of the past

that country are already at the final stage. Apart from that, the Ukrainian Parliament has approved 38 laws required for entry. All that's left are a couple of regulations of a technical nature and those are almost ready. I am sure that Ukraine will fulfil all the necessary criteria and will become a member of the WTO in 2007.

In November 2004, the Orange Revolution was greeted throughout Europe as an epoch-making event that would finally lay the foundations for real democracy in Ukraine. Two and a half years on, what changes have there been in the country since the days of Kuchma?

Undoubtedly, the Orange Revolution has led to many positive changes and the most important thing is that these changes have become irreversible.

The most important is freedom of speech which, in turn, has stimulated the process of social development.

Ukrainians have started to demand more of their politicians. It's no longer easy to manipulate voters' opinions by

making one-off social concessions.

Ukraine has gained the opportunity to establish unity based on European values.

The Ukrainian people have changed since those days and now feel they can influence the powers that be. And those powers are obliged to listen.

Can you paint a picture of the balance sheet of your leadership two and a half years after you took office? What are you most proud of? What are the areas where you might have done more?

I understand that the events following the Orange Revolution made many Ukrainians very disappointed. We politicians must recognise that we have not succeeded in keeping the promises made at the Maidan. As President of Ukraine, I also bear a heavy burden of responsibility for the errors of the Orange powers.

We could, and ought, to have done more. We ought to have been more decisive and consistent. At the same time, I would like to remind you of a few of our small successes:

We have made a 12-fold increase in the new child grant;

We have increased minimum wages and pensions;

Military service has been reduced from 18 to 12 months;

As promised, Ukraine has withdrawn her troops from Iraq;

Over a million jobs have been created;

We have taken decisive steps toward entry into the WTO;

Ukraine has been recognised as a country with a market economy;

Before 2004 it would have been impossible to imagine these changes. But this is only a small part of everything I want to do before my mandate expires. There is still a lot of work to do.

For example, we still need to conclude our entry into the WTO. Also, we need to continue working to complete the tax, agricultural and administrative reforms.

But the objective I consider most important and truly momentous is preparing the new Ukrainian Constitution. That will be the pivot of national development, the operative guarantee of individual rights and freedoms and the basis that will allow effective and democratic government of the country. ■■■■