

## DEJA VU IN UKRAINE

By Helen Chebanenko and Peter Rutland

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Three years after the Orange Revolution, Ukraine is experiencing ... another Orange Revolution. The September 30th election will lead to the return to power of a coalition of the two pro-reform parties led by Yulia Timoshenko and President Viktor Yushchenko, who together hold 228 of the 450 seats in the Ukrainian parliament.

Ukrainians have learned that it is not so easy to run a democracy. 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 Timoshenko and President Yushchenko led to her dismissal in September 2005, and her surprising replacement as premier by the Moscow-friendly Viktor Yanukovich.

The roots of Ukraine's unsettling experience with electoral democracy 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, corruption and the like – are common problems for residents of both regions. But they are not put front and center 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 has been promising criminal investigations of the 2006 natural gas deal with Russia should she become prime minister.

One positive development was the declaration by President Yushchenko on October 3rd that he hoped to see a coalition government which included ministers from both sides including representatives of Yanukovich's Party of Regions, which together with its Communist allies holds 202 seats in the new parliament.

Ukraine's difficulties also reflect choices made about what kind of democratic institutions to adopt. 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 since the majority that controls the parliament may not be the same as the majority that elected the president. Even if the premier and president are on the same team, personal rivalry may cause conflict of the sort which led to Timoshenko's dismissal.

A second problem is the choice of an electoral system based on proportional representation (PR). A US style first-past-the-post system encourages the formation of two strong parties that converge on the median voter as they seek to win a majority. In contrast, a system of 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 pointed out that if only 0.14% more voters (about 30,000 people) had supported the Socialist Party, it would have cleared the 3% threshold required to win seats in the parliament. That would have meant that the Orange coalition would have won only 222 seats, four short of a majority.

Of the 15 post-Soviet states only the Baltic countries and Ukraine are rated as "free" by Freedom House. Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova are rated as "partly free," and 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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