

# Big in Brussels

Reform hopes resting on PM as President Yushchenko loses Western support

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In addition to the dramatic decline in his popularity inside Ukraine, where polls now give President Viktor Yushchenko only 6% support, there is a slower but still noticeable decline in Mr. Yuchchenko's popularity among Western governments and international organisations, such as the EU, NATO and the Council of Europe. On June 5 the Council of Europe released a damning resolution condemning the lack of "concrete and visible progress in identifying instigators and organisers" of the murder of journalist Georgi Gongadze. Only a month after he was elected President in December 2004 Mr. Yushchenko personally promised the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that it was a matter of "honour" that he would find the organisers of this high-profile crime. ▶▶

As his credibility erodes among Euro-Atlantic decision-makers, the only international popularity base Mr. Yushchenko will have left remaining to him will be the pre-1991 Ukrainian diaspora which will continue to cheer the Orange Revolution hero for many years to come. The fourth wave diaspora that left Ukraine since 1991 is far more in tune with public opinion inside Ukraine and so is unlikely to follow suit.

### Following in Kuchma's footsteps

The same three-stage slide from great hope to discredited figure was evident under former President Leonid Kuchma. First Ukrainian leaders lose support inside the country, though it took Mr. Kuchma the Gongadze and Kolchuga scandals in his second term to reach the low level of support that Mr. Yushchenko has achieved in his first time without the help of any major scandals.

Second, support for the reformer then declines in the West as he is increasingly seen as a conservative supporter of the corrupt status quo. In 1994, you may be surprised to hear, Mr. Kuchma was seen as the reformer over the incumbent conservative Leonid Kravchuk.

Third, most of the Ukrainian diaspora (except for enlightened pockets such as those based in Washington DC) are left as the only group which continues to believe in the potential of Ukraine's President. The World Congress of Ukrainians was Mr. Kuchma's apologist to the very end, even condemning in Soviet-era language US Congress and Helsinki Commission resolutions in support of free elections as "interference" in Ukraine's internal affairs. A continued distaste within the Ukrainian

» diaspora for criticising the president is evident among Ukrainian expats working in Ukraine. The very same expat who is an ardent critic of the Bush administration recently advised this author to “take it easy” in criticising Mr. Yushchenko.

## Support shifting towards Tymoshenko

While Mr. Yushchenko, who was once hailed as an icon of world democracy, continues to flounder, his rival Mrs. Tymoshenko has seen her international reputation enhanced. She has now effectively overcome the damage done by her 2005 dismissal, which came amid allegations of incompetent economic policy and left her tarnished by association with damaging talk of wide-ranging reprivatisation. While she has scored high-profile points among Western governments by pushing for energy sector transparency and anti-corruption measures, Mr. Yushchenko is increasingly viewed as obstructing Mrs. Tymoshenko's efforts. This changing dynamic was evident in the choice of recent international visits, namely Mr. Yushchenko's May visit to Canada and Mrs. Tymoshenko's June visit to Brussels.

## Alternate trips: Canada and Brussels

Both leaders were given rapturous welcomes but for different reasons. The Ukrainian diaspora gave President Yushchenko a vivid welcome in Toronto and Winnipeg with the heads of diaspora organisations queuing up to be photographed alongside him. Prime Minister Tymoshenko was given equally enthusiastic greetings at meetings with both the EU and the European People's Party (EPP). The centre-right EPP is the largest political group in the European Parliament with 74 member parties from 38 countries. Mrs. Tymoshenko's Fatherland Party and Mr. Yushchenko's Our Ukraine are both associate members of the EPP (full membership is restricted to parties from EU member states).

Of the two foreign visits the more important for Ukraine's future will be that to Brussels. Canada's support for Ukraine's NATO membership is welcome but Canada's influence on the international stage has declined since the golden era of former PM Lester Pearson and is now limited. Brussels, on the other hand, hosts the EU and NATO with the Council of Europe close by in Strasbourg.

In choosing Canada, Mr. Yushchenko's priorities were questionable. While visiting the

country for what was a longer than usual visit, simultaneously rebuffed an EPP delegation visiting Kyiv by cancelling a planned meeting and then made excuses about a busy schedule preventing him attending the quarterly EPP meeting in Brussels.

## Burning bridges with Europe

The reasoning is apparent. The President knew that the Ukrainian diaspora was his last bastion of support after his domestic support had declined to one-sixth of that four years ago and following growing disillusionment in the West. Mr. Yushchenko's relations with the EPP deteriorated during the December 2007 Lisbon meeting attended by himself and Mrs. Tymoshenko while Presidential Secretariat head Viktor Baloha circulated an attack on Mrs. Tymoshenko at the EPP meeting that was looked upon very badly with EPP member parties.

President Yushchenko has also reduced Western support further by using recent Western media interviews in Canada, France and Spain to attack 'his government'. Such practices are seen as unpatriotic and not proper etiquette for leaders to undertake while traveling abroad. One could never imagine Prime Minister Blair attacking opposition leader David Cameron in an interview in *Le Monde* or the *Globe and Mail*, never mind his own political allies.

At the March EPP meeting Mr. Yushchenko was criticised by EPP member parties for his and Mr. Baloha's daily attacks on Mrs. Tymoshenko. According to an *Ukrayinska Pravda* report, German Chancellor Angela Merkel refused to shake his hand and turned her back on him when he approached her.

President Yushchenko therefore decided to cut his losses with the EPP, especially as he had de facto abandoned Our Ukraine and switched his support to the new presidential party of power, United Centre. The EPP delegation in Kyiv was given a day's notice that President Yushchenko could not meet the group. A member of the delegation was stunned: “When a president fixes an official meeting with such a serious group, it cannot be cancelled so lightly without any explanation. This simply leads to misunderstanding and bafflement”.

The EPP delegation was headed by Jozef Daul, a man close to French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who will be president of the EU in the second half of this year and will host an EU-Ukraine summit in September that may offer Ukraine an Enhanced Partnership Agreement. The EPP were not only angered by the late-

ness of the cancellation but by the fact that the Presidential Secretariat failed to offer any alternative time to meet them during their stay in Kyiv. The President then topped this off by not attending the EPP meeting in Brussels.

## The search for a champion

What all of this shows is that there is a slow but discernible change in attitudes towards Ukraine's leaders. Mrs. Tymoshenko is successfully convincing the West that she is Ukraine's main hope for reform. EU and EPP officials recently praised Mrs. Tymoshenko for her ability to promote reform and privatisation while battling inflation and corruption. Meanwhile, seven months of attacks on his own government, coupled with the fact that this is actually the second attempt to undermine a Mrs. Tymoshenko government (the first being in autumn 2005) is leading Brussels to become increasingly disillusioned with Mr. Yushchenko. Little wonder that the President opted for a warm reception in Canada over a critical one in Brussels.

Similar attitudes towards the awkward Tymoshenko-Yushchenko dynamic are also discernible in Washington. A Western image is crystallising of a pro-reform government that is a martyr to Mr. Yushchenko's ambitions as the President plays the role of “aggressor-usurper,” in the words of a *Ukrayinska Pravda* reporter who accompanied Mrs. Tymoshenko on recent Brussels visit and observed: “the EPP openly stands on Tymoshenko's side against the President in the current conflict.”

## Committed to fighting corruption

A major component in the changing Western attitudes towards Mr. Yushchenko and Mrs. Tymoshenko rests over the perception that he is uninterested in fighting corruption while Mrs. Tymoshenko stands alone in this battle. Of particular interest is the energy sector, where corruption is at its worst and most lucrative. Ambassador Keith Smith, head of the Working Group on Ukrainian Energy at well-known Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies told *Business Ukraine* that the energy policies pursued by the Tymoshenko government have been praised by Western governments and international organisations alike. Meanwhile, President Yushchenko has defended RosUkrEnergo that the Yuriy Yekhanurov government introduced as part of the January 2006 gas deal.

In contrast, the Tymoshenko government

has sought to remove all corrupt intermediaries. As Ambassador Smith notes, Western governments have supported the current government's attempts at removing corrupt intermediaries from the Russian-Ukrainian gas relationship: "Starting with her efforts to negotiate directly with Moscow on gas prices and remove rent-seeking middlemen such as RosUkrEnergy, she has attempted to provide transparency to the energy dealings of her country, a policy that would significantly benefit the rest of Europe," he comments.

### Taking Tymoshenko's side

It was therefore not surprising that at the concluding press conference of the EPP meeting, EPP President Vilfred Martens said: "On behalf of the EPP I would like to state our solidarity with the course undertaken by the Tymoshenko government, its anti-corruption and privatisation programme. I would also like to support Mrs. Tymoshenko as the leader of the democratic coalition. We remain perturbed that there are attacks on the government and at the same time there are attempts to block the course of reform."

Other leaders were lavish in their assessments of her first six months in office the PM also met Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, who praised the economic and anti-inflationary policies of the Tymoshenko government. Vice President of the EU Commission Gunter Verheugen said of her government's efforts, "I admit that Mrs. Tymoshenko has achieved significant progress from the point of view of Ukraine's economic development."

### The need for political predictability

The EU and NATO have reiterated the importance of political stability and unity of the Orange coalition for Ukraine to achieve a breakthrough in integration into NATO and the EU. The undermining of the Orange coalition, through defections inspired by the Presidential Secretariat, while preventing the Tymoshenko government from undertaking pro-reform and anti-corruption policies, have damaged the President's credibility further among Western governments and international organisations who find it irrational that a President can appear to support Euro-Atlantic integration with one hand while undermining it with the other.

Two years ago Ukraine's drive to receive a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) was nearly achieved at the Riga summit in November 2006. Then the international atmosphere and alignment within NATO was more positively aligned towards support for Ukraine's entry than it was to prove two years later. In the meantime, Western governments and organisations have become frustrated that the President has apparently not learnt from past mistakes and is undermining a Tymoshenko government for the second time. A seasoned Ukraine watcher in Washington told Business Ukraine: "This appalling conflict breeds domestic instability and severely undermines Ukraine's security and sovereignty, especially its chances of getting MAP." A US diplomat added, "Europeans were telling Mr. Yushchenko that the collapse of the coalition would doom his MAP prospects. Some people thought that the idea might lead him to try to hold the coalition together, though I can't say that I've seen much evidence of that."

### Fine words, poor performance

NATO General Secretary Jaap de Hoop Scheffer recently reiterated a view that is now commonly heard, namely that Ukraine's chances of being invited into a MAP are dependent upon political stability and co-operation between Mr. Yushchenko and Mrs. Tymoshenko. British Ministry of



PRESIDENT YUSHCHENKO WAS ONCE THE DARLING OF THE WEST, BUT A FAILURE TO TURN HIS REFORMIST CREDENTIALS INTO RESULTS HAS LEFT MANY DISILLUSIONED WITH THE HERO OF THE ORANGE REVOLUTION

Defence adviser on Ukraine James Sherr, recently appointed head of the Russia and Eurasia programme at London's prestigious Royal Institute for International Affairs where Mr. Yushchenko spoke two months ago, bemoaned the fact that, "what they [Western governments] cannot bear is being told by the President that he supports the Orange coalition whilst his people do everything to destroy it."

### International community eyeing 2009 presidential elections

International support for Ukraine's leaders has fundamentally changed in the crucial lead-up to the 2009 presidential elections. A consensus of strategically-important policy shapers and political leaders throughout the West are now looking to Mrs. Tymoshenko and not Mr. Yushchenko as the main hope for a reformed Ukraine which is finally ready for genuine partnership and integration. Mr. Yushchenko had an opportunity following the 2007 pre-term elections to regain some of his dwindling domestic popularity and Western support by following through on his election rhetoric in support of a democratic coalition. Instead, he is widely perceived to have done everything in his power to undermine the coalition and government. As a consequence, he has lost support both domestically and internationally, while the ensuing domestic instability has become the main obstacle in Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO.

With Western hopes increasingly focusing on Mrs. Tymoshenko, support from Brussels and, crucially, the promise of a more dynamic and rewarding partnership, could greatly strengthen the Prime Minister's hand in the political tussles that lie ahead. ●