

Ukraine: US-Russia conflict provokes government collapse

Cheney's visit

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The coalition government of Ukraine, made up of the party of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and the smaller Our Ukraine party of President Viktor Yushchenko, collapsed in bitter acrimony on Wednesday, September 3.

Yushchenko has threatened to dissolve parliament and call snap elections unless a new coalition can be formed, blaming the crisis on Tymoshenko. The two were the leading figures of the 2004 "Orange Revolution," in which forces backed by Washington and western European powers orchestrated a campaign to secure the presidency of Ukraine for Yushchenko against the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich.

Members of Yushchenko's Our Ukraine party walked out of the cabinet in protest at Tymoshenko's refusal to support a parliamentary condemnation of Russia's actions against Georgia in August, as well as proposals tabled September 2 by the pro-Russian opposition Party of the Regions to greatly reduce the powers of the president, which Tymoshenko's party had supported in an effort to undermine her coalition rival.

"A political and constitutional coup d'état has started in the parliament," Yushchenko said of Tymoshenko's planned constitutional changes in a televised speech following the cabinet split.

In an interview with the *Financial Times* following the government's collapse, Yushchenko suggested that Russia had fuelled the political crisis, claiming that Tymoshenko had held secret talks with "forces abroad."

In response, Tymoshenko stated on national television: "I am sorry that the president behaves irresponsibly. The coalition was destroyed under his instruction."

The prime minister has also claimed that the crisis is a product of Yushchenko's political desperation, as he attempts to boost his poor public standing prior to next year's presidential election, in which both he and Tymoshenko are expected to run.

Upping the ante, Yushchenko has reportedly initiated a prosecution against Tymoshenko on charges of high treason. Tymoshenko claimed on September 8 that she received a subpoena to appear before state prosecutors. The prosecutors' office declined to comment.

Under Ukraine's constitution, the two leaders have until the weekend to revive their coalition. If they cannot do so, then the Verkhovna Rada (parliament) is allowed 30 days to form a new

coalition.

Yushchenko is expected to call a further round of parliamentary elections unless the two "Orange" factions can come to a temporary accommodation. A new general election would be the third parliamentary vote held in as many years.

In the last parliamentary election of September 30, 2007, the Our Ukraine party led by Yushchenko only managed to gain 14 percent of the vote, while the Bloc Yulia Tymoshenko received more than 30 percent. The Party of the Regions, led by former prime minister Viktor Yanukovich, won 34 percent.

The 2007 vote was called in order to unseat a coalition government led by Yanukovich's Party of the Regions. This had followed an earlier breakdown of the "Orange coalition" between the president and Tymoshenko.

The disputes between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko have centred on who should wield most power, the presidency or the post of prime minister. With control over highly lucrative privatisation deals, oil and gas transit routes, government contracts and the judicial system at stake, the rival oligarchic clans in Ukraine that form the basis for party politics in the Verkhovna Rada have diverged according to their own interests around Tymoshenko, Yushchenko or the Party of the Regions.

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The political standoff in Kiev has been exacerbated dramatically by the great-power rivalries of Washington and Moscow. Yushchenko is deeply unpopular in Ukraine and relies on support from Washington for his political survival. Tymoshenko retains some popular support within Ukraine and, backed by her vast personal fortune and that of her husband, is seeking to gain the presidency in next year's elections.

To this end, Tymoshenko also is courting alliances with Moscow and eastern Ukrainian oligarchs who have close ties with Russia. This is what has prompted her to restrain her previous anti-Russian chauvinist rhetoric, and to refuse to condemn the Kremlin's recent military action in Georgia, as demanded by Yushchenko and Washington.

The split in the government provided an embarrassing backdrop to US Vice President Dick Cheney's visit to Ukraine on September 5, as part of his tour of the Caucasus region and eastern Europe.

The tour was aimed at furthering US belligerence against Moscow following the conflict between Georgia and Russia over the fate of the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

During his stop in Kiev, Cheney pushed Ukrainian membership of NATO and urged Yushchenko and Tymoshenko to patch up their differences in order to press ahead with efforts to further integrate Ukraine with the West.

"Ukrainians have a right to choose whether they wish to join NATO, and NATO has a right to invite Ukraine to join the alliance when we believe they are ready and that the time is right," Cheney said, ignoring the fact that membership of the US-led military organisation is opposed by the overwhelming majority of the country's citizens.

Cheney met separately with both Tymoshenko and Yushchenko in Kiev. During his meeting with the president, Cheney reiterated his support for Yushchenko's plans for NATO membership and stated that the US had a "deep and abiding interest" in Ukraine's security.

The US vice president urged the former allies, whom Washington backed in the anti-Russian "Orange Revolution," to renew their alliance. "Ukraine's best hope to overcome these threats [from Russia] is to be united," Cheney insisted.

Cheney's aides said that he had advised both Ukrainian leaders that Moscow was to blame for their divisions. Spokeswoman Megan Mitchell commented, "He [Cheney] acknowledged it's a challenging time for Ukraine because of recent developments in Russia."

While Cheney's aides pointed to Russia as the main force destabilising Ukrainian politics, the alliance that was fostered by Washington in 2004 between Tymoshenko and Yushchenko was always a delicate one, based mainly on the immediate need to win power from the old pro-Russian Kuchma regime. While Tymoshenko has generally adopted a pro-Western position, her calculations are based on her own immediate interests and those of the section of big business oriented to her party, the Bloc Yulia Tymoshenko.

Since 2004, Yushchenko and Tymoshenko have waged a bitter struggle for power. For the Ukraine elite, the "Orange Revolution" was merely an expedient coalition of rival oligarchic clans who felt marginalised by the previous regime of Leonid Kuchma.

Never a genuinely democratic movement, the unprincipled character of the "Orange Revolution" has been exposed by the fact that Yushchenko and Tymoshenko have attempted to use the levers of power to weaken their rivals and boost their economic fortunes and those of their cronies.

High inflation, pervasive corruption and massive levels of social inequality have contributed to Yushchenko's deep unpopularity. The president, who continues to be hailed in the Western media as the leader of a popular democratic revolution, now has opinion poll ratings of around 8 percent.

Yushchenko's political support for the Mikheil Saakashvili regime in Georgia is viewed with great suspicion, if not outright

hostility, by many Ukrainians. Ukraine has close economic, cultural and historic ties to Russia, and most Ukrainians have no desire to see relations with Moscow soured.

US-based political analysts Medley Global Advisors have stated that the breakdown of the "Orange" coalition in Kiev has worked to Moscow's advantage: "Russia is looking on with thinly veiled satisfaction and, as critical gas price talks loom, will be hoping that Tymoshenko teams up in a government with pro-Moscow forces."

Olexiy Haran, a political science professor in Kiev, warned that Moscow would try to capitalise on the collapse of the former "Orange Revolution" partners. Haran stated that the political impasse "would complicate Ukraine's efforts to integrate closer with NATO and the European Union."

The government crisis in Kiev, and especially the dire political fortunes of Viktor Yushchenko, will indeed be met with some satisfaction in Moscow. The Medvedev/Putin regime sees the US-backed Ukrainian president as one of its main opponents in the former Soviet region, and may look to Tymoshenko as a possible ally.

Speculation is rife in Kiev that either Tymoshenko or Yushchenko could form an alliance with the Party of the Regions, sharing power with Yanukovich, the very candidate in the 2004 presidential elections that the "Orange Revolution" claimed was a Russian stooge and an authoritarian threat to Ukrainian democracy.

Rinat Akhmetov, the main billionaire backer of the Party of the Regions and the richest man in Ukraine, has adopted a more friendly position towards NATO in recent months, holding out the possibility of future Ukrainian membership of the Western alliance as a boon to the country's large armaments industry. However, Akhmetov and the Party of the Regions, which maintains the need for close cooperation with Moscow while wanting to develop alternative ties to big business in the West, is wary of unsettling the intricate network of business and energy deals with Russia.

This latest collapse of the uneasy coalition between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko—as well as the military recklessness and anti-democratic measures of the Saakashvili regime—is an object lesson in the impossibility of achieving democratic ends from the US-backed "colour revolutions."

The forces brought to power in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 were unstable coalitions of local oligarchs and opportunistic politicians from the previous regimes, who had thrown their lot in with Washington's plans to extend its influence in the region at the expense of Moscow.

With such antidemocratic and politically incendiary forces as its allies, Washington hopes to win dominance over Eurasia, a scheme that can only bring greater political instability and conflict to the region. For its part, Moscow will seek to use its influence over these and similar figures to advance its interests in what it regards as its "near abroad."



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