

Under reconstruction! We apologize for the absence of certain materials.

A THIRD ONE NEEDED?

08 March 2003

Few remember the name Fortinbras. He is the "third one", who appears on the stage after the two main characters have squabbled, fought and died for the throne.

Things like that don't only happen in the Kingdom of Denmark. They also happen where opponents are completely absorbed in their arguments while the public is bored.

Things like that might happen in this country, too. While Yushchenko and his team beat about the bush and the President's team are busy scheming against the opposition, elections are approaching. Both players - the authorities and the opposition - are already played out. The public is sick and tired of their imitation of state-building activity, and disheartened by the absence of clear post-election prospects.

The public has long given up on the authorities and is dispirited by the opposition's promises. But the audience is not going to climb onto the stage. The audience and the exhausted actors are waiting for a new person to appear on the stage and announce, "Here I am, vote for me!"...

The latest national poll, conducted by the Razumkov Center, revealed the following rating of potential candidates for the presidency: Viktor Yushchenko - 21.4%; Petro Symonenko - 13.2%; Viktor Yanukovych - 7.2%, Yulia Tymoshenko - 6.9%; Viktor Medvedchuk - 6.6%; Olexander Moroz - 5.3%; Natalia Vitrenko - 5.2%; Serhiy Tyhytko - 2.9%. (8.6% of respondents said they would vote against all these candidates, 8.2% would ignore the elections, and 14.5% gave no answer.)

All the representatives of the authorities mentioned above deny (so far) their participation in the race, while the opposition leaders declare their determination to run and win. Evidently, none of these actors is likely to receive an ovation.

Analyzing the poll returns, we could suggest several pre-election scenarios.

Authorities

The authorities want to keep their hand in, to retain and augment their capital, and the sine qua non for that is a successful election. Leonid Kuchma's third term in office or its prolongation till 2006 are out of question under the present circumstances. And the representatives of the ruling elite have bleak prospects for the 2004 presidential elections, because their activities are obviously unpopular: Yanukovych - 8.8%, Medvedchuk - 6.4%, Lytvyn - 6.3%, Tyhytko - 6%. Their rating as potential candidates for the presidency is no higher: Yanukovych - 7.2%, Medvedchuk - 6.6%, Lytvyn - 1.7%, Tyhytko - 2.9%. Even if taken together, their ratings are well below Yushchenko's, therefore Kuchma's "designated" successors have no chances of getting any further than the first round of the elections.

Their chances to win the race are also as very low: Yanukovych - 19%, Medvedchuk - 17.2%, the rest have an even lower chance.

53.1% of the respondents who are going to vote for a representative of the authorities are positive that the pro-presidential camp should nominate a single candidate. However, 48.1% of active supporters of the government, and apparently, Kuchma himself, are undecided about his worthy successor. Yanukovych and Medvedchuk are mentioned most frequently - 18.4% and 16.7% respectively, but these figures speak for themselves.

Even with a concentrated effort to prop up a pro-authority candidate, his rating is unlikely to grow much. The best Yanukovych and Medvedchuk might achieve is 10%, Lytvyn and Tyhytko - 7%, even if the yet undecided voters decide in their favor.

Such a candidate faces a tough race in an unfavorable environment. The fact that he represents an extremely unpopular and badly compromised leadership is a heavy weight that could drown any candidate. Such a candidate would have to distance himself or, at least pretend to, from the authorities and even criticize them in public.

The question of a single candidate is a complex one, involving both the choice of the right person and his backing by rival financial-industrial groups. The fact that a candidate is the President's nominee and protege doesn't guarantee their financial, organizational and mass media support.

The authorities are most interested in preventing the opposition from consolidating. The more candidates the opposition slates, the better. The authorities might as well stimulate the presidential ambitions of those who represent the "second echelon leaders" - Leonid Grach [the leader of Crimean Communists, ex-Speaker of the Crimean Parliament] or Boris Tarasyuk [ex-Foreign Minister, future leader of the People's Rukh of Ukraine]. There are also Vitrenko, Kononov and other party leaders who the authorities may agree with.

It is clear that the standard assortment of resources - a controlled mass media, budget funds, central and local government agencies - will not work as efficiently as they did in last year's elections. The pro-authority mass media have discredited themselves and are trusted very little now. So their backing, primarily via central TV channels, will be of little help moreover - even harmful.

Being aware that the control over spending budget funds will be extremely rigid, the authorities are already looking for alternative sources: revenues from large-scale smuggling of consumer goods, contributions from financial-industrial groups (including proceeds from shadow privatization), Russian capital, criminal "aid funds" and others.

No backing from governors is guaranteed, either. Concerned about their own future after 2004, they will nod in acquiescence, but put their eggs in different baskets.

In theory, the authorities may accomplish a miraculous breakthrough - an economic growth spurt that would inspire Ukrainians to revise their attitude. A million or two jobs (at least seasonal) may be created, wage and pension arrears may be cleared and salaries raised. In practice, though, such prospects look unreal, considering this leadership's previous "accomplishments".

Some effect may be achieved by "patronizing" the non-governmental sector (analytical centers, sociological services etc.), influential political experts and journalists with the aim of creating a favorable media environment for the election campaign. There might be offers of preferential terms of funding, or there might be pressure from all manner of controlling and supervising agencies.

There might be attempts to copy the experience of the opposition - tours of the regions, speeches before working collectives and direct communication. The problem is, the authorities have nothing to offer the people, except for one-time dispensations of cereals and promises to asphalt a road or lay on gas supply to a village, by maneuvering budget resources from one locality to another. But cereals won't suffice for all, nor will asphalt or gas. There remain reports about sudden GDP growth and the stability of the national currency. But GDP is an unknown quantity, and the bulk of Ukrainians can't fully appreciate the stability of their currency, for the simple reason of its absence in their pockets. At the same time, the people watch the wealth of the upper levels growing rapidly and their own life getting worse from day to day. It's not so easy anymore to pull the wool over their eyes.

Medvedchuk stated recently that the authorities would win in all the future political battles. But as far as the presidential race is concerned, his optimism is not shared even in the highest echelon of power. If this leadership carries on with its policy, it is doomed, and none of its candidates will get as far as the second round. We may have a unique situation in this country: having lost in the first round, the authorities may join the crowd of impartial onlookers and shift their energy to ensuring transparent and democratic elections.

It's also possible that after the long destructive war Kuchma will have to wage on Yushchenko, if he fails to push through his "own" successor. Yushchenko might meet Kuchma's expectations and hopes - after all, he saved Kuchma from resignation twice in the past, and he looks into the future complaisantly.

These layouts and assessments can be realistic only on the condition of more or less "normal" elections. But dirty tricks and total control might well change the picture. The only way the authorities could secure their candidate's election is through total employment of administrative resources (to the point of removing Yushchenko from the race by canceling his registration at the eleventh hour).

We are well aware of the likely consequences of such "elections" - ZV and other sources have said and written enough about it. The authorities, too, must bear in mind the following: the chasm between them and the rest of the population (albeit overlooked) is certain to become deeper and wider, and the "European train" (NATO and the EU) with its values, norms and higher living standards is sure to pass by, leaving Kyiv at the roadside. Warning signals are already coming from the West (so far at informal levels): the next presidential campaign (namely campaign, not election) in Ukraine will be under its watchful eye and control. So the referees won't credit *such* elections and will never recognize them as legitimate, and a president, elected through *such* means, may find himself boycotted by the leaders of the democratic countries.

Opposition

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The objective of the opposition is power, and all of its four leaders (Yushchenko, Symonenko, Tymoshenko, Moroz) have stated their resolve to seize it. Each of them claims to have a constructive action program and a team capable of fulfilling it. Many bring such claims into question, though.

Opinion polls show that popular trust in the opposition is falling, rather than growing. More and more people are disillusioned and dissatisfied with its activity. 55.1% are dissatisfied with the opposition factions in parliament (the pro-presidential majority is judged even more negatively - 65%). It should be noted, however, that representatives of the opposition in parliament are more active and capable in lawmaking: they have drafted 1,310 bills (versus 908, initiated by the majority).

Ukrainians are less keen on the protest actions initiated by the opposition. Even its leaders seem to be doubtful about the desired effect of such actions. Nevertheless, they keep announcing optimistically that 200,000 people are expected to protest on March 9 in Kyiv alone (a ten times smaller number would be a success).

Being deprived of access to the mass media, the opposition has learned to talk to people directly. But its leaders and spokesmen have nothing new to talk about on second visits to the same towns - no new ideas to offer, no tangible results to show, no new faces. The decline in Ukrainians' interest in opposition rallies became clear in September last year, amidst vain attempts to arrange them on Kyiv's central square on a daily basis. Just like the powers that be, the opposition leaders arrive at the sites of protest rallies in expensive jeeps and limousines, and those who take to the streets can't but notice that.

Few come out to demonstrate out of earnest conviction. The authorities secure the desired number of participants through command and administration, and the opposition has to resort to financial injections. Without them, even its leaders can hardly gather a crowd of more than a thousand in the remote countryside - mostly elderly communists or political enthusiasts. Arranging such "grass-root meetings" has already become a profitable business.

The opposition constantly demands access to live air on TV. The authorities wouldn't lose anything, if they gave the opposition leaders two hours on air a day. After four or five live appearances, the people would stop watching and listening. They would listen to Tymoshenko and Moroz longer than then others, but only a little. Symonenko's position is very well known, and he would have to repeat himself. Yushchenko either has no definite position or, if he has one, doesn't let it be known. He would hardly repeat himself, because his abstruse improvisations are almost impossible to repeat. Yushchenko's utterances have always been too arcane for ordinary people. But now even journalists, experts and his closest allies don't understand what he says.

In February the opposition drafted a bill on the opposition, proposing to legalize a shadow (opposition) government. Many would be disappointed to see the list of ministers - the promised new team. And the chair-sharing squabbles may split the opposition long before the election date.

Naturally, the fact that a candidate is a member of the opposition would be decisive for only 28.4% of respondents in choosing the next president. 37.3% are indifferent whether a candidate is or is not in the opposition. 5.8% would vote for a candidate who supports neither the opposition nor Kuchma. Taken together, it makes 43.1% of potential voters who are indifferent to the opposition. There are also 11.3% who mean to vote for a candidate representing the authorities, and 17.2% of respondents were undecided.

The level of complete support for the opposition leaders' activities is higher than that enjoyed by the authorities: Yushchenko - 22.1%, Symonenko - 14%, Tymoshenko - 11.4%, Moroz - 10.2%. Their ratings as potential candidates for presidency are higher, too: Yushchenko - 21.4%, Symonenko - 13.2%, Tymoshenko - 6.9%, Moroz - 5.3%.

According to the poll, Yushchenko has better chances of winning the race than the other opposition leaders (43.8% vs. Symonenko's 15.5%, Moroz's 6.8% and Tymoshenko's 6.3%). So almost half of respondents, irrespective of their attitudes to the authorities or the opposition, regard Yushchenko as a real candidate for the presidency in Ukraine.

An impressive majority (68%) of those who are ready to vote for the opposition are convinced that the four opposition forces should nominate a single candidate. Yushchenko is mentioned more frequently than the others - 37.7%. According to expert estimates, his "presidential" rating may grow from the current 21.4% up to 30% (3.8% of votes might come from Tymoshenko's electorate, 2.4% - from Moroz's, 2.4% - from Symonenko's). But even if those who are still undecided voted for Yushchenko (increasing the figure up to 35%), he wouldn't collect enough votes to win in the first round. Tymoshenko, should Moroz and Symonenko support her, would collect some 11% of votes. If Moroz withdrew from the race in favor of Symonenko, the Communist leader would collect up to 17%.

None of the opposition leaders has a chance to win in the first round, so the main task should be to put a pro-authority candidate out of the race before the second round. Since the second round is practically guaranteed for Yushchenko, it is in his and his allies' interests to support Symonenko in the first round (it's possible at the expense of Moroz's electorate: Moroz will hardly run for president, fearing a third defeat in a row). Tymoshenko, who will face difficulties getting through to the second round, has a narrow field for maneuver within the opposition quartet. She will hardly withdraw in favor of Symonenko, so she is simply doomed to agree with Yushchenko.

The opposition has the following resources: the potential of popular dissatisfaction with the ruling regime; the positive image, earned by Yushchenko during his premiership and by Tymoshenko, when she was vice premier and chaired the budget committee in parliament; Yushchenko's and Symonenko's relatively high and stable "presidential" ratings; the possibility of the industrialized eastern regions supporting Yushchenko.

The opposition faces the following challenges: the future tests of its leaders for their readiness and ability to act as one team; the test of Yushchenko's pro-Russian position this fall (on the [proposed Russian-Ukrainian-German] gas transportation consortium and the Common Economic Space [a new intra-CIS structure initiated by the Presidents of Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus]).

The opposition has all grounds and reasons to demand the ruling leadership's resignation. It is not important in principle who exactly will replace Kuchma. What is important is the need to change the very model and essence of leadership. The new leader is supposed to convince everyone (the public at large, the old and the new government) that this is an unacceptable and punishable way of ruling the country.

The system of government must be changed, too. Yushchenko is certainly right in saying that he wouldn't like his children to depend on a president, however kind he may be. But Yushchenko still hasn't come up with a draft bill on the redistribution (limitation) of presidential powers. Moreover, he evades direct questions from journalists, apparently being still undecided on this issue.

But no matter what the outcome of the future elections, Tymoshenko, Symonenko and Moroz have played their positive role. Thanks to their efforts, the notion of opposition has been firmly established in the public consciousness as a vital institution within the state. And they deserve gratitude for it from all of us, including those who are governing us today: tomorrow they will be in opposition.

The ruling authorities have exhausted themselves, but the opposition is almost exhausted as well. This trend is going to be aggravated with the onset of parliamentary and nationwide debates over the political reform [initiated by Kuchma]. Evidently, there is no leader at this point in time, worthy of being elected President of this country. And none of the opposition leaders is up to the mission of the nation's savior, either. Nor is any of them seen as Ukraine's future president in Moscow, Warsaw, Berlin, or Washington.

People

The returns of the poll showed Ukrainians' utter illiteracy in constitutional and other legal matters. (And these people are supposed to decide on complex structures of the Organic Law!) At the same time, the returns showed their good intuitive knowledge of how power is shared in this country and where exactly they belong in this system. But from time to time the nation's "fathers" have to pass through a ballot box, and that's the only real opportunity for the people to feel themselves as a source of power.

The future elections are going to be different to Ukrainian citizens who have shed their naive belief in would-be accomplishments. All of the present "contenders" have government experience, and each can be judged by his deeds. Words are not trusted anymore, neither are slogans and action programs. Now our voters will evaluate a candidate's successes, mistakes, failures, cases of abuse and involvement in affairs...

The general public sentiment on election day is easy to predict: it will mirror the well-known realities of their everyday life. There are two central realities ones - lawlessness and the absence of a social perspective. The overwhelming majority of Ukrainians are convinced that their fundamental and vital constitutional rights are not observed: the right to work and earn their living (78.5%); the right to a sufficient subsistence (89.9%); the right to health care (80%); the right to social security (78.2%), the right to housing (74.7%); the right to education (71.1%). 76% of Ukrainian citizens see no prospects for themselves in this country; 68.2% don't see prospects for their children and are not sure that they will be protected against encroachments on their rights and liberties. Every fifth respondent (20.8%) doubts if his/her children will be grateful to him/her for giving them life.

Ukrainians blame their misfortunes on the authorities. Not because they are dependants, as made by the old Soviet system (of which the authorities accuse everyone who demand aid from the government). After all, taxpayers hire authorities specifically to render such aid. Besides, only 15.6% of Ukrainians rely on government aid in subsidies or other benefits (while the officially admitted number of low-income, disabled and other categories of citizens who are entitled to such aid is far greater). The rest are waiting for jobs (19.4%), decent salaries (54.6%), a normal environment for entrepreneurship (5%), credit on agreeable terms (3.2%). The government has been unable and unwilling to provide all of it. Too long have the people watched their rulers' wealth grow. Too long have the rulers had them in their pocket, now reassuring them with promises and then scaring them with enemies of reform: leftists, lawmakers, Western advisers...

The authorities have done everything to cause strong popular aversion. For the last few years the level of support for the central government's activity has remained stable at under 8%. The authorities are neither trusted nor respected. They are poles apart from the rest of the people who don't have any influence on them and don't regard themselves as a source of power. 83.7% of Ukrainians are convinced that they have absolutely no influence on the central government and 79% are positive that they have no influence on local authorities; 86.2% don't see themselves as masters in their country; a mere 3.5% of respondents believe that power in Ukraine really belongs to them.

So it's quite natural that the overwhelming majority wouldn't vote for a representative of the authorities, primarily - for Kuchma. 81.6% of respondents wouldn't vote for amendments to the active laws that would help Kuchma to be re-elected for a third term in a row; 77.8% wouldn't like to see him among the candidates at the 2004 presidential elections, albeit on quite legitimate grounds; 69.6% would support his voluntary resignation.

Any other candidate, backed and nominated by the authorities, wouldn't collect more than 11.3% of the vote.

The opposition, for its part, has done a lot to make the public stop responding to its appeals and protest actions, from which nothing ever came. At the [March 2002] parliamentary elections, the voters expressed their trust in the non-authority parties. They expected victories and strong moves from their chosen representatives. Alas, in vain. There were both objective and subjective reasons. But can rank-and-file voters and taxpayers see what's what without a critical number of independent mass media? 12 months after the elections, they still can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. Neither the authorities, nor the opposition have been able to give them at least one hope for the better.

As a result, the level of trust in the authorities remains as low as before, while the level of popular support for the opposition has dropped to 38.7% from 42.9% last February. The none too great number of people who were ready to take part in protest actions last September has now shrunk to a mere 7.2%. And if we remember that only one third (31.1%) of those who were going to take to streets in September actually did so...

The people are dissatisfied with their life and government, dissatisfied with the opposition, but they don't speak up. They are not going to take any radical steps, whether on their own or under the opposition's banners. And yet, on March 31 Ukrainian voters demonstrated the weight of their say. But the vox populi can be heard only if elections are elections, not a total falsification. Now Ukrainians don't believe in fair elections of the future president: only 20.8% of respondents expect them to be democratic; more than half (51%) are sure of the opposite.

The price of the future election is clear to all. It is commensurate with something more than a five-year term of presidency. It is tantamount to the next decade or two of our life. A ballot slip is a ticket for a train that may take us either to a civilized future, or to the stale and corrupt past. The people must have an opportunity to make their own choice, they can't be herded cynically to wherever their government decides. That's what should be the prime concern of those who care about the future election. And it's necessary to look for ways and means to make it transparent and truly democratic. The sooner they are found, the better. Otherwise, we are all doomed to our past...

The quality of elections is a very important issue, but the quality of choice is as important. The authorities have their supporters (11.3%), the opposition has a lot more (28.4%). But the rest 60.3% of voters are still in a quandary, waiting for a new hero to turn up on the political scene.

Third Force

Such a hero may never turn up, but a certain niche for the so-called "third force" or "dark horse" does exist. It was found during the 2002 election race, but used most stupidly by the "Women for the Future", the "Winter Crop Generation Team", and other promising "generations". And the niche was narrower then - between 30% and 35%, since the opposition was trusted more in advance, as a promising force in parliament. Now the opposition will be evaluated by its actual deeds.

A new leader is unlikely to emerge from the grass roots: the civil society in this country is not mature enough to produce such a leader, and the most active citizens have already flocked to the pro-presidential or the opposition camps. There are several forces, both inside and outside Ukraine, that could start looking for a "third" candidate.

At first glance, no one in either camp ought to be interested in one more, stronger rival. But there are forces in both camps that may become outsiders as soon as a single candidate is nominated and so may lose their contract with a future president. These might be some political parties that are in opposition blocs, or some financial-industrial groups that make up the presidential pool. A good candidate, able to meet the expectations of the "undecided" voters, might radically change the status of those who are now in the shade of more successful, more charismatic or richer "colleagues".

The most serious external factor is Russia as the most concerned about the outcome of a presidential election in Ukraine. Bankova and the Kremlin are already consulting on Kuchma's feasible successor, and the Kremlin is alleged to be ready to back whoever he names. But the Kremlin doesn't trust Kuchma unconditionally, doesn't support the idea of his third term in office, doesn't see a way to outstrip Yushchenko and hasn't found anyone among the available assortment of potential successors who could speak with it on clear terms and abide by agreements, instead of promising gold mines. The Kremlin is not too happy about Yushchenko, either: it flirts with him - just in case, but doesn't love him.

In fact, Russians justly believe they have enough levers to make any Ukrainian president respect them. But Russian political engineers are searching across Ukraine for the one they could help take the top chair in a country of strategic importance to Moscow. Russia is ready to cooperate with a "contractable" candidate.

The United States is less inclined to such a policy. But it is ready to deal with the presidential elections more seriously than it dealt with last year's parliamentary elections: the pre-election campaign and polling stations on the election day will be monitored very closely. Washington knows the Ukrainian leadership's worth and is far from fascinated by the candidates who represent the opposition. It doesn't see anyone in Ukraine who could become this country's savior. But it may well be looking for such a person or may start looking for one as the elections draw nearer.

Even if the national mass media are totally controlled by the warring pro-presidential and opposition camps, even if they both put up strong resistance to a "third" candidate, even if Moscow's and Washington's positions differ, the electoral factor may play its unexpected and possibly decisive role.

Representatives of both camps admit that there is still enough time to "launch" a third candidate. Moreover, the authorities are already looking for a candidate with a certain chance, who could be their cover and shelter after 2004. So there is a threat of a false "third force" (a law enforcement officer, a governor, a young reformer etc.). The opposition doesn't keep its aims under wraps, but leaders of its second echelon are working on reserve options, in case the top-seed lose their chance or initiative.

But the question remains unanswered: who is that man? Who is he that would be liked by the voters, being neither the government's nor the opposition's representative? Who has an unstained past and is able to say something new about the future? Who will Russia see as a man of his word and America - as a man of deed?

There is a real demand for a candidate representing a force which is equidistant from the authorities and the opposition. By the laws of a market economy, where there is demand, there is always supply. We are living in a country with a transition economy and provisional policy. The pre-election political market still has some time to respond. Theater seasons normally open in the autumn. Let's wait till then.

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