

Event Summary: Ukraine: Internal Turmoil, External Reactions

Taras Kuzio, from the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, spoke on the implications of this fifth political crisis from Ukraine's domestic point of view. Kuzio asserted that the President and the Prime Minister deserve equal blame.

The crisis happened because Viktor Yushchenko was poked one too many times in the eye and he finally reacted. Viktor Yanukovich's fault was that he and his camp disrupted the delicate balance of power created in 2004. The opposition, which includes the former Kuchma camp, has snubbed all of Yushchenko's proposals and attempts at a moderate policy. Even the President's more moderate attempts to deal with constitutional reform were not accepted by other politicians.

In early March, Yulia Tymoshenko was the only radical voice calling for early elections, but now her position is accepted by the whole opposition. Why? The trigger was during the third week of March when the Party of Industrials and Entrepreneurs defected to the anti-crisis coalition, as well as police raids on the activists and a sense of déjà vu when arms and weapons were planted in their apartments. Basically, there was a sense of encroachment and fear on the part of Yushchenko, who then moved to Tymoshenko's position. There were also internal changes in the Our Ukraine party, marginalization of businessmen, and domination of democrats.

Regardless of the decision passed by the Constitutional Court, the developments of the last few days (such as resignations from parliament) necessitate another round of elections. The Party of Regions would like to have elections in the fall, to have time for populist decisions, whereas Our Ukraine wants them in June.

In order to prevent another crisis, Ukraine needs not only constitutional reforms but also an all embracing agreement to resolve all of the main problems. Yushchenko will either come out of this crisis in a strong position (his ratings have already doubled) or he will become a marginalized figure, in which case the baton will be passed to Tymoshenko.

Steven Pifer is a Senior Adviser to the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS and former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine and he spoke on the impact of the crisis on Ukraine-U.S. relations.

The U.S. government's interest is exactly the same as it was a decade ago, which is to see Ukraine as a strong state with a market economy. Right now both camps in power were elected democratically so the U.S. cannot take sides, as did many European states. Instead the U.S. sees the need for a peaceful resolution. The crisis is not a welcome development in the U.S. and U.S. government officials were forced to postpone visits to Ukraine in order not to be pulled to one side or the other. Another detriment for Ukraine is that now Rada will most likely be unable to negotiate the final legislation necessary for admission into the WTO, since the Rada cannot pass a final resolution.

U.S. concerns are about the undoing of the balance achieved in 2004 between different institutions (such as the removal of powers from the president). Another set of concerns revolves around questions of corruption. And concern is just the uncertainties of the

situation: Constitutional Court, elections – what if after new elections, the Rada's composition remains the same?

The U.S. wants to see a compromise between Yanukovych and Yushchenko. Elements of this compromise should include: a decision on early elections, agreement over the poaching of Rada deputies, and some elements of agreement on policy. This kind of crisis is not good for the Ukraine, or for the Ukraine-U.S. or Ukraine-Western relations. The image of fragmentation, internal power struggles, and unpredictability does not bode well for Ukraine.

Dmitri Trenin, Deputy Director and Senior Associate at the Carnegie Moscow Center, spoke about whether this crisis good for Russia.

People in Russia do not see this crisis as welcome, but it is not unexpected. Russian political elites never bought into the notion of a “Colored Revolution” in Ukraine. Instead they saw it as just reapportionment of power among various Ukrainian clans. They think that this is probably not the last crisis that Ukraine will experience.

Rather than treating Ukraine as former or future part of Russia, Moscow is treating it as an independent entity on Russian border. Russia's interest in Ukraine are: gas and oil transit, making sure that Ukraine is safe for Russian business, keeping Ukraine away from NATO, defense industrial assets, and the Black Sea fleet.

Post-revolutionary Ukraine has turned out to be good for Russia, because Moscow can communicate with different parties and actors. The Russians have learned the lesson that there can be no pro-Russia politicians in Ukraine and the Kremlin will not make the same mistakes as in 2004. There is also a general understanding that Moscow should not meddle in Ukraine's internal politics.