



**Mykola Riabchuk**

## Farewell to the cargo cult

The current conflict in the Ukraine is more than a quarrel between two Victors, according to Mykola Riabchuk. Rather, it is a result of an "incomplete revolution" post-1991 and after the Orange upheaval in 2004. Ineptitude and infighting on the part of Orange leaders are to blame the comeback of Yanukovich in 2006, who has rapidly re-established the mechanisms of authoritarianism, writes Riabchuk. Now bribery, blackmail, and intimidation are back as a common means for solving disputes and influencing the media and judiciary.

History loves to repeat itself — in new genres. A spectacular high-drama staged more than two years ago in Kyiv, entitled "The Orange Revolution", is being mimicked today on the same spot by different actors as an insipid farce. In 2004, it was a spontaneous revolt against large-scale electoral fraud. Hundreds of thousands of citizens, primarily Kyivites, came out on the Maidan (Independence Square), more to defend their civil rights and human dignity than to support any particular politician. The risk they took was enormous, since they were up against a regime with a riot police and an army determined to use any means necessary to retain power.

Recently, people have been brought to the Maidan by the authorities themselves to express, in old Soviet fashion, their unanimous support for the corrupt government and the messy parliament dissolved at the beginning of April by the president, Victor Yushchenko. "They pay 40 hryvna a day and 100 hryvna a night," confesses an older man from Zhytomyr who has been camping in the Mariinsky Park next to parliament. "I can earn my monthly salary here in a week."

But a group of younger people observing the political show on the Maidan are divided in their opinion. "I'd never have accepted money from those guys," says Yurko, a student of the Mohyla Academy. "Why not?" says his friend Alexander, who lives in a student dormitory. "They give back to the people the money they stole from them. Their recruiters offer 40 hryvna for just two hours standing around with a blue and white flag. I don't support Yanukovich, but my grant is 350 hryvna and I get no extra allowance from my parents. It would be better if we took the money and paid them lip service. Otherwise they might bring in their real supporters from the Donbas region, who could do a lot of damage around here."

Obviously, the authorities deny remunerating the protesters, however if pressed, party leaders recognize that unspecified "party funds" have been used for travel expenses and daily upkeep. Inquisitive journalists have calculated that the Donbas oligarchs, with their total wealth, could afford to maintain around 10 000 people on the Maidan for the next 94 years. The small number

of genuine protesters, as well as their passivity and lack of enthusiasm, says a lot about the force driving them and the cause they allegedly came to fight for. Experts muse why the anti-Orange authorities have tried to imitate the Orange Maidan in such a dull, uninventive way. The conclusion is that they probably still believe that the Orange Revolution was made by money, and that if they invest more money, they will get the same result. Volodymyr Shcherbyna, a columnist for *Gazeta po-ukrayinsky*, aptly called it a "cargo cult".

He was referring to a quasi-religious cult that allegedly emerged in the Pacific islands among aboriginal tribes after WWII. During the war, aborigines had seen how American soldiers had received lots of nice things — "cargo" — from the sky. After the Americans left, they decided to appease the sky gods in the same way, so as to receive the same bounties. They developed a sophisticated ritual that imitated the landing of aeroplanes — with bonfires around the landing stretch cut out in the jungle and priests with wooden headphones communicating with the gods.

But here, the gods are unlikely to bestow mass support upon Victor Yanukovich and his government, and even less likely to do so for the heavily compromised parliament. The pseudo-Maidan is probably devised to create television images for internal and external consumption, and perhaps to provide Yanukovich and his ruling coalition with an extra trump in his negotiations with the president and the Orange opposition.

However the conflict that fuels the protests is no mere personal quarrel between two Victors, one of whom won a highly contested presidential election in 2004 and another who one won a relative majority of 33 per cent in the parliamentary election in 2006, and who mastered a highly controversial parliamentary majority, allegedly using bribery and blackmail. It would also be too simple to interpret the conflict as mere rivalry between two different oligarchic clans — "the millionaires versus the billionaires", as some observers wittily put it — or even as a regional tension between the "pro-Russian east" and "pro-European west".

Essentially, the conflict is a result of the "incomplete revolution" that failed to thoroughly and coherently de-Sovietize the country in 1991, after Ukraine's independence, and in 2004, after the Orange upheaval. True, there were few chances for radical change in 1991, since at the time the democratic forces in Ukraine were just too weak — they could barely master one third of the votes in either the parliamentary or the presidential election. In 2004, however, the chances for radical change were pretty high, and it was primarily ineptitude, paltriness, and infighting on the part of Orange leaders that caused their defeat in parliament and the comeback of Yanukovich in 2006.

Had the political system changed by that time, and had new rules of the game been established, Yanukovich's return, however depressing it might have been for genuine democrats, would not have been a problem *per se*. In actual fact, the comeback of old men in new guises occurred in many post-communist countries shortly after their democratic turnovers without leading to any revival of authoritarian *ancien regimes*. In Ukraine, however, the old men did not radically need to change their guise and their habits, since the political system also remained virtually unchanged. Yushchenko, to his credit, proved honest enough not to use the informal mechanisms of the blackmail state he inherited from Leonid Kuchma. But he did nothing to dismantle them, nor to replace them with workable democratic institutions based on the rule of law. The institutional void had to be filled, and Yanukovich, with his socialist and

communist allies, has rapidly re-established the mechanisms of authoritarianism. Bribery, blackmail, and intimidation have again become a common means for solving political and economic disputes and for influence the media and judiciary.

The Orange president, with his legitimate right of veto, has become the major obstacle for the Party of the Regions and for Yanukovich, in his attempt to monopolize power and resources. An unprecedented campaign was launched in parliament, mostly behind the scenes, to draw opposition MPs into the ruling coalition and to take control of the constitutional majority that would make the position of president irrelevant. Businessmen have been prime targets, since, in a country with no rule of law, very few can afford to be in opposition to omnipotent and unscrupulous authorities.

Yushchenko, who had long been criticized by his allies for being too soft a character and for making too many compromises with Yanukovich, finally lost his patience and signed a decree that dissolved the parliament and scheduled new parliamentary elections for May 27. His arguments are clear enough: as the supreme guarantor of the constitution, he is obliged to stop a creeping *coup d'etat* and to ask the people whether they really agree to grant a constitutional parliamentary majority, in other words, to give two thirds of vote, to the "Regions", the communists, and the socialists.

All know pretty well that the election results will be, at best, the same as last year's. It means that the new parliamentary majority is highly problematic, while hopes for a constitutional majority and full marginalization of the president must be buried completely, despite the enormous resources already invested in this "project". Yanukovich's followers have a lot to lose in new elections and naturally refuse to accept the presidential decree. The boycott is clearly unlawful but, with parliament, the government, and half of Ukraine's regions under firm control, they certainly are not going to give up easily.

Negotiations between pro-presidential and pro-governmental forces will be tough and compromise will be painful for both sides. Only one thing is clear: Ukraine will not see a repeat of Yeltsin's dissolution, with the help of tanks, of the Russian Parliament in 1993. In Ukraine, neither is society eager to fight for the elites' sake, nor are the elites themselves eager to risk lucrative business by any serious instability. Certainly, none would dare to delegitimize themselves internationally by resorting to violence.

However immature Ukrainian society might be in terms of civility, and however clumsily Ukrainian elites might behave, all seem to be gradually recognizing that they live in Europe, where democracy — like it or not — is the only acceptable game in town.

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