

One hundred days of the Orange Revolution: The ordeals of a public policy school

The Yushchenko–Tymoshenko Government is taking the unheard-of right steps. For the first time, Ukraine has a president and a Government whose strategy promotes national interests. For the first time, the country’s leaders have clearly outlined their political and public goals, identified the problems that need overcoming, and are demonstrating the political will to implement this strategy. In their posts, they are doing the work of the state, not engaging in give-aways. For the first time, Ukraine’s political leaders are fighting for the power to fulfill their civil tasks. For the first time, a Ukrainian government is enjoying an unheard-of high level of public trust.

Why, then, instead of discussing of the President’s Strategy and the Government Action Plan are the nation’s newspapers focusing on conflicts among the top leaders as a fantastic lack of organization in their offices and an inability to prepare and make well-thought decisions?

It turns out that, today, the years-long neglect of the need for a fundamentally new, democratic Government machine is starting to kill even the uniquely powerful political will to democratic behavior. Without the support of a professional Government machine, even individually brilliant politicians come across as “soviet,” inept and faltering in an environment of cutthroat openness. If the country does not immediately begin to institute a professional, democratic bureaucracy, Ukraine will soon face only two alternatives: social chaos or the strong hand of authority.

For the first time in the history of independent Ukraine, the State Budget reflects a strategy that consistently carries out publicly declared political goals.

The political goals of the Yushchenko election campaign, supported by all those who were able to find out about them—to draw attention to society’s poorest and to fight corruption—became the key arguments for the amendments to the 2005 State Budget proposed by the new Administration. Even if Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko did nothing else, this innovation would already have been enough to leave a permanent mark in the history of Ukraine’s democratic transformation.

The Yushchenko–Tymoshenko State Budget is twice revolutionary. Firstly, nobody ever dreamed that a government could so fearlessly and creatively launch a real war against the two most terrible diseases of Ukrainian society: poverty and corruption. Secondly, with one stroke, the country’s leaders eliminated the system of double standards that was maintained by the “under-table” agreements that Premier Tymoshenko referred to as “horse-trading.” The soviet system of administration always existed in two parallel dimensions that never intersected: the world of public slogans and the world of real fiscal decisions that were kept hidden from the masses.

The Ukrainian government continued this dual existence even after the country became independent. The only thing that changed was the ultimate purpose of the Budget process, which remained hidden from the public eye. During soviet times, people worked on behalf of soviet military and ideological might, whereas under the Kuchma presidency the Budget served a new kind of monetary distribution, which came to be called “the give-away.” When the Budget distribution process was disclosed in a revolutionary move, it sent shockwaves through Ukrainian society. Nobody believed—and most still cannot believe—that there will be no “give-aways:” nobody will enjoy special breaks and the rules will be actually the same for everybody.

The new Budget policy proved not viable, as it was implemented using soviet centralized command methods.

Why did this strategic Budget provoke such total dissatisfaction and resistance? Why did Ukrainians not support the changes to the Budget, which were aimed at resolving clearly correctly identified problems whose solution the Maidan had voted in favor of?

It turned out that these changes to the Budget not only stopped the worst corruption and provided systemic support to the most vulnerable groups in Ukrainian society, but they also had a painful impact on nearly all of those who supported the new team: foreign investors, honest Ukrainian businesses, both large and small, and non-government organizations.

It turned out that Ukraine’s political leaders had made important decisions without any analysis of the inevitable economic and political impact. The unreformed Cabinet apparatus, a bureaucracy that has never been taught to work in an environment of democratic competition, proved unable to provide the nation’s leaders with thorough and reliable information on the likely reaction of key interest groups.

The Government’s research team is unable to meet the needs of political leaders.

The huge Government analytical and informational machine, with dozens of research institutes attached to each ministry, proved completely unable to fulfill its role of providing analytical and informational support for policy-making. The Government’s research branch with its theses and monographs supported by millions of hryvnias from the State Budget has not been designed to research Government policies under political and economic competitive conditions. Government analysts and academics are unable to work with the real problems of real politicians. They can only follow the pattern developed during soviet times, of offering justification for the commands that come down from the boss provided that he has already clearly formulated his decision. This makes it clear why soviet leaders did not need any analysis of political options—let alone impact analysis regarding key interest groups.

However, the current Government is working under open democratic competition and it needs informational and analytical support of a completely different order. The Government's Budget decisions affected specific large and small commercial interests across the entire political spectrum and resulted in enormous pressure coming from all sides against the undesirable changes. Such radical changes can be sustained only by minimizing their negative fallout. For this, the Government needs a clear analysis of policy options and a forecast of their impact, as well as all available positive arguments that will make public resistance political suicide. Any specific anti-corruption move should have clearly separated the impact on corrupt activity from the impact on above-board activities. But these steps were actually missing in the preparation of the Budget amendments.

Politicians have no idea of what it means to make decisions democratically.

In addition to the inept informational support system, another important cause of the Government's lack of preparedness for the impact of its decisions lies in the country's politicians themselves. Ukraine's top Cabinet members usually rely on a totalitarian, top-down system of decision-making and implementation, counting exclusively on the power of office and their own uncompromising ideological "rightness."

Having eliminated the under-the-table consultations typical of the previous regime, the Government has not started to institute or even seriously considered the need for open, formalized consultations with stakeholders at the preparatory stage, before policies are made. The country's top politicians also are in desperate need of an immediate awareness campaign on democratic governance: they don't know how a democratic Government works and, naturally, continue to count on the well-known, familiar centralized command approach to implementing decisions.

Top-down soviet executive discipline does not work without the use of force.

The top-down soviet hierarchy for implementing decisions was effective because it used force against anyone who disagreed. Those who seized power were absolutely right and had the right to make decisions. Any expression of doubt was treated as a challenge, an attempted coup.

The decision-making process was completely opaque. The "people" were only offered special ideological justifications presented in mass propaganda campaigns that hid the true motives and impacts, something the famous KGB officer P. Sudoplatov once called a "smokescreen."

If you can't shoot those who disagree, you have to consult with them.

Democratic Governments generate future support for their policies through the broadest possible consultations at the identification stage for problems on which the Government intends to focus all its resources. Western politicians say: "If you can't sell the problem, you'll never gain support for its solution."

The Budget process demonstrated that, at the moment in Ukraine, all decisions continue to be developed behind closed doors, albeit for different reasons. Not because the opaque procedure allows elected officials to cover up their thieving, but because these officials still don't know what "transparency" in a Government's daily routine should look like. Because they held no consultations with stakeholders, they were completely unprepared for public reaction, for the dissatisfaction and protests of those affected by the amendments to the Budget.

Worse, nobody in the Government is currently evaluating for elected officials the cost of specific decisions and who should pay for them. Nor have stakeholder consultations—as a purely technical and methodological process that will help prepare policies that will not later have to be cancelled—been given legitimacy.

The gap between the real political situation with free and open political process and the unaltered old soviet approach to preparing policy decisions will inevitably lead to a growing number of policies that fail to tackle anything because politicians will begin to fear negative fallout. The lack of knowledge and skills among Government agencies to manage the routine daily exchange of information with political rivals and victims of Government decisions will inevitably lead either to the informational process being monopolized or, if this proves impossible, to a clamp-down for fear of public reaction.

Ukraine's government has no choice: it has to go through public policy school.

1. How lucky government workers were during soviet times! Those who were dissatisfied were shot, while the media sang the praises of the government's wonderful decisions. However, the democratic revolution won and now the Government has to consult in the open, turbulent public arena.
2. It turns out that all democratic Governments are scared of the press. This fear subsides when the technologies of a public presence emerge.
3. Politicians win and lose elections on the informational battlefield. A democratic Government has no choice: without an effective informational strategy, it simply has no chance of succeeding in the 21st century, when the dissemination of information, analysis and evaluations is fast and cheap.
4. An effective informational strategy in Ukraine is exceptionally important for additional reasons. When undertaking radical transformations, the Government must persuade the public to support reforms that are complicated, painful and, as a rule, confusing. But it is impossible for most people to support something that they don't understand. In addition, it is relatively easy for the opposition to discredit any reform initiatives using disinformation, populist slogans and accusations.
5. Political competition in a democratic context is the competition of ideas. There must be a way to clearly explain Government ideas so that citizens will take responsibility in a democratic decision-making process.

6. There is only one format for communication between a society and its Government that can lead to some understanding. This is the format of a dialog on Government intentions regarding every important policy issue. The Government must put questions to all interest groups and provide its vision of answers to these questions: What social problems has it identified as its absolute priorities? How does it understand the root causes of these problems? How has it determined the cost of the problem, its extent and its impact on social development? Who suffers the most from the problem? Who benefits from the status quo? Does this problem really need a top-priority solution? What other options is the Government considering? On what basis was the proposed decision chosen? What are the costs of this decision, of inaction? What are the resources available and the barriers to implementing the proposed decision?
7. Ukrainian bureaucrats need to quickly learn to produce high-quality policy analysis on issues requiring decisions. This analysis should clearly anticipate the impact of a decision and the reaction of all interest groups. It should also show the cost of the problem in the short- and long-term, the cost of discarding the decision, and who will actually gain or lose from the decision.
8. Government policy analysts should provide recommendations for Government actions in view the anticipated public reaction: personal consultations between the premier and stakeholders, the premier and political parties; widespread public awareness campaigns; consultations across the regions; economic impact analyses; comparisons of the impact on different population groups, and so on.
9. The Government should regularly involve the public, that is, its voters, by offering Green and White Papers on key policies. A Green Paper is a Government's appeal to voters, requesting their attention to a specific issue. The Government uses a Green Paper to explain how it understands the situation and what it sees as the roots of the problem and to get feedback from voters and interest groups regarding its vision. A White Paper sums up the results of these consultations and presents the Government's intended measures.
10. It makes little sense to worry that there is no time for such analyses. An ill-prepared decision will not be implemented anyway. Even worse, an ill-prepared decision will inevitably be revisited or even cancelled, which has a negative impact on public confidence in the Government.
11. Never postpone public involvement until the decision is made. This is the best way to guarantee public dissatisfaction as a silent Government creates a vacuum that draws in active anti-Government sentiments.
12. Paternalist rhetoric needs to be changed into democratic language. There is no need to make the public happy and "give the people much-deserved happiness." Voters want freedom and normal order from their Government, that is, clear and stable rules of the game: that is why it came out on the Maidan. The people of Ukraine are quite capable of taking care of themselves and they very much expect the new political team to make civil servants at all levels stop interfering in their lives.

13. The most important thing is to insert common sense into the work of the Government machine and to toss out the absurd pseudo-science that was traditionally in Government programs and plans. Make these as simple and clear as the speeches of the country's leaders. Ukrainians are not stupid and they can see whom to trust and whom to rely on.