

ICPS newsletter[®]

The 2006 Coalition: How not to step on the rake

In an article for the Kyiv-based weekly "Korrespondent," ICPS Director Vira Nanivska outlines the four principles for building a parliamentary coalition. These principles, based on the experience of EU countries, include placing the issue of government posts at the end, focusing on discussing a common program and resolving controversial issues, a rational distribution of key Government posts, and the establishment of a body responsible for political coordination among the participants in the coalition. Unless these basic principles are followed, the future coalition risks being as shortlived as the previous one

Putting together a coalition in the Verkhovna Rada and forming a Government based on it as the result of democratic elections is a first for our country. The risk of doing something wrong is quite high. Let's remember the short-lived union of Nasha Ukraina with the Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko and the Socialists after Viktor Yushchenko's victory in the presidential election. How can the new coalition be protected against old mistakes? Do our politicians understand where these mistakes were made?

Their latest moves seem to indicate that this is not the case. The president has been insisting on the need to put together the "common principles" along which the new coalition might be built. BYT is determined not to participate in a coalition unless Yulia Tymoshenko is given the premiership. But wait. Didn't we have common values among the "Orange team" before? And wasn't Ms. Tymoshenko the premier then? Apparently, Ukraine's politicians still haven't learned how to put together a stable coalition and have little idea of what the basis for one might be.

Yet where we are about to tread, many Europeans have trod before. In Europe, coalitions can even be formed by parties who were the main rivals during an election campaign. They can also be formed of minor parties, generally 4–5 in order to gain a majority in the legislature. Finland, for instance, surprised everybody in 1995 when it cobbled together a coalition of five political parties with fairly divergent ideologies—and it proved to be one of the most stable coalitions in the country's history. In Germany today, the Social Democrats have joined in a coalition with their main opponents, the Christian Democrats. Ideological differences and

difficult personal relations are no barrier to establishing a stable coalition in Europe.

So, wouldn't it be worthwhile to learn something from this experience and our own failures? Ukrainian politicians are concerned to a person about the proper principles for building a coalition. What kinds of principles operate in countries with a successful history of coalition-building?

Posts come last on the agenda. This is a principle that is very hard for most politicians to swallow. The members of a coalition should be represented in the Government in proportion to their success in the elections. This general principle does not need negotiating. Still, detailed discussions about who will take what post have no room at the starting phase. They will only complicate the negotiation process and quite possibly lead to the collapse of talks.

The main thing is to put together a common program and resolve key differences. In most coalition talks, once the parties have confirmed their interest in joining, the main focus of discussion is a common Plan of Action. First and foremost, representatives of potential participants need to clearly determine the range of controversial issues that are likely to lead to conflict among them and to try to resolve them. Conflicts can be about overall state policy, or about personal and personnel expectations.

For instance, after the elections to the Swedish Parliament in 1991, four parties indicated their interest in forming a coalition. It turned out that they had different views on a total of 147 policy issues! These ranged from building a bridge to Denmark to how to punish underage lawbreakers. To resolve these issues, mini-groups were formed on the basis of one

representative from each party. Together, these groups were able to find and agree to compromises on 140 of the issues. At a higher level, in an "executive" group that included the first secretary of each of the parties, they were able to reach a compromise on the remaining 7 issues. The presence of a common Plan of Action removes the grounds for political conflict in the future, as all the parties have committed up front to carrying it out.

Have a rational approach to giving out posts. When it's clear what this or that minister will be doing and the obligations of the post are set down in writing, it is not that scary to give a portfolio into the hands of another party. When posts in the Government are being given out, the important points are that the ministers need to be people who understand the particular area and that each party receives a number of posts that reflects its base in the legislature.

Set up a coordination mechanism. There needs to be a body within the Government that professionally handles ongoing negotiations among the partners in the coalition. Over time, new political issues will arise and the coalition needs to be able to agree to a position on them. The main thing is that this body include representatives of all the parties in the coalition and that it also have enough authority within the Government. The latter is usually achieved by making sure that the premier and other key politicians are part of the group.

Basing the negotiations for a coalition on these principles has obvious advantages. Firstly, it reduces the influence of personalities and offers the opportunity for unexpected players to be included in the negotiating process: negotiations are led, not so much by the leaders as by the teams, and the discussion is not about their eventual portfolios but about their future activities. Secondly, a coalition that is formed on the basis of a common Plan of Action and is able to eliminate conflicts and controversial issues among its partners at the start has a far better chance of surviving. For one thing, there will be few things for its partners to squabble over. ■

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