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Newsletter for the international community providing views and analysis from the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc (BYuT)

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Foreign Ministry farce ends but issues remain

The stalemate in selecting Ukraine's foreign minister was broken with the appointment of a close ally of President Viktor Yushchenko, Arseniy Yatsenyuk. The former economics minister secured 426 out of 450 votes in the Verkhovna Rada, so ending the farcical situation which has seen Europe's second largest country without a foreign minister since the resignation of Borys Tarasyuk in January.

Many political observers believe the candidature of Mr Yatsenyuk was dictated less by compromise and more by the fatigue of the parties involved. The government of the Pro-Russian Party of Regions dominated Coalition of National Unity (which last week renamed itself from the Anti-crisis Coalition) had twice rejected the president's preferred candidate of career diplomat Volodymyr Ohryzko, due to the latter's pro-Western and pro-NATO stance.



▲ The sovereign state of Ukraine appoints a foreign minister after an embarrassing stalemate lasting several months.

In the end, it took only 15 hours from Mr Yatsenyuk's nomination to his appointment. The 32-year old new foreign minister has banking and economic experience, speaks good English, but lacks the diplomatic experience of Mr Ohryzko.

Mr Yatsenyuk's stiffest test will be to maintain Ukraine on a European trajectory and resolve the vexed issue of NATO membership. When quizzed about NATO, he remarked, "In 2003 the constitutional majority adopted the Law on the NATO membership that is why the issue will be considered through this very legislative prism."

Hryhoriy Nemyria, BYuT deputy leader and Ms Tymoshenko's top foreign affairs advisor said, "Not having a foreign minister for two months has been detrimental to our nation's image. Naturally, we honoured our commitment to our pact with Our Ukraine and voted to support the appointment. We trust Mr Yatsenyuk will seek to deliver on the pro-European course set by President Yushchenko.

"My main fear is that the root of the problem has not been adequately addressed. We still have executive branches at odds over foreign policy and it will be interesting to note if there will be personnel changes in the ministry to reflect a new line in thinking. The sad fact remains that whilst Mr Yatsenyuk is slightly more palatable to the prime minister, unless there is a shift in policy the issues faced by his predecessor will arise again with a vengeance."



Emma Udvin, an EU spokesperson, said that the European Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner intends to cooperate closely with the newly appointed foreign minister. “We have embarked on talks to reach a new enhanced agreement between Ukraine and the EU and the foreign minister will be a very important partner in this view. It’s very important for us to cooperate with such a partner toward support of reformation, stated in the action plan. We are satisfied with an opportunity to resume the cooperation,” said Ms Udvin.

Media freedom under attack

The Tuesday morning repeat of the popular live UT-1 TV show entitled ‘Toloka’ was pulled from the air last week amid mounting concern over a new bout of media censorship in Ukraine.

The programme that aired live the previous evening had featured the two leaders of the parliamentary opposition, Yulia Tymoshenko, leader of her eponymous bloc, and Vyacheslav Krylenko leader of the Our Ukraine faction.

By all accounts the opposition leaders presented themselves positively. Political insiders say that this angered prominent government figures who used their influence to have the repeat programme cancelled.

President of the national TV channel, Vitaliy Dokalenko, dismissed allegations of political censorship, saying that the decision not to air the repeat was a consequence of the host being “unprofessional”.

Denying he was under pressure from the Cabinet of Ministers, Mr Dokalenko said, “I was dissatisfied with the preparation of the programme, with the behaviour of the host and the organisation of the interactive communication.”

It is perhaps just coincidental that, earlier, First Vice Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and the Verkhovna Rada Speaker Oleksandr Moroz had been critical of the station’s editorial policy.

Andriy Shevchenko, BYuT deputy and Head of the Verkhovna Rada Committee in charge of Freedom of Speech and Information rejected Mr Dokalenko’s claims. “They sound a lame excuse as such claims may be laid to a great number of TV programmes of that TV channel,” said Mr Shevchenko, “I know the Tuesday programme has greatly irritated some Party of Regions members.”

Victor Pavliuk of Toloka, was obviously disappointed. “Probably, hard times have come for the freedom of speech in Ukraine,” he said.



▲ Leader of the opposition, Yulia Tymoshenko, and Vyacheslav Krylenko of Our Ukraine on the TV show Toloka. The repeat of the acclaimed programme was cancelled giving rise to renewed accusations of political censorship of the media. A recent report by Reporters Without Borders was highly critical of press freedom in Ukraine.



Mykhaylyna Skoryk, chief of the Kyiv Independent Media Trade Union, saw it as a case of political censorship, "Yesterday's Toloka indicated the highest rating through all the history of this programme. Considering this fact, accusing the presenter of low professionalism, sounds, at least, untimely."

BYuT, which is an ardent supporter of press freedom, called upon President Viktor Yushchenko to dismiss Mr Dokalenko. The party also made a request to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly to take this latest development into account in its assessment of democratic processes in the country.

The previous week, Andriy Shevchenko speaking at the launch of a new weekly English language business magazine, 'Business Ukraine', warned businessmen, dignitaries and journalists of increasing political pressure being applied to the media.

Speaking to Inform, Mr Shevchenko said, "They may have put an end to the temnyky but journalists increasingly face political pressure, threats of violence, intimidation and sanctions through legal suits designed to hit them economically."

"Such pernicious and punitive action is as effective a gag as any government order."

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of legal actions brought against journalists. Ukrayinska Pravda reported that it is "facing 5 lawsuits from Speaker Oleksandr Moroz."

"Journalists simply cannot afford to fight legal cases, pay the fines and risk the gauntlet of imprisonment, all for the sake of a story," said Mr Shevchenko.

In a recent landmark case, a reporter faced a 1 million UAH fine. "Such pernicious and punitive action is as effective a gag as any government order," remarked Mr Shevchenko.

Tymoshenko to receive prize for political courage

This week, BYuT leader Yulia Tymoshenko will visit Paris where she will meet with politicians and the media and receive the Prize for Political Courage from the Paris-based organisation Politique Internationale and the Sorbonne University. The award recognises Ms Tymoshenko's political courage and contribution to furthering democracy in Ukraine.

The last recipient of this prestigious award was Pope Jean-Paul II, who was awarded the prize in recognition of his tireless campaigning for human rights, and contribution to shaping the political environment that led to the dismantlement of the Soviet-Empire and fall of communism in Europe.

Questions or comments? E-mail us at taras@byti.org.ua