

Independent.co.uk

Yulia Tymoshenko: the leader looking beyond a revolution

The Monday Interview: Yulia Tymoshenko brought down Ukraine's president. But that makes her nation's current fight look easy, she tells Shaun Walker

Monday, 21 March 2011

A grandfather clock in the corner of the room strikes 3pm, the door opens, and the most recognisable haircut in eastern Europe arrives into the room. Beneath it is Yulia Tymoshenko, Ukraine's former prime minister and – perhaps – its future president. Ms Tymoshenko has travelled a long path since Ukraine's independence 20 years ago: from businesswoman to gas oligarch, then to revolutionary leader, prime minister, and now again opposition leader, this time one under criminal investigation.

At a time when the world's attention is focused on the extraordinary uprisings in the Arab states, Ms Tymoshenko has some words of advice for the protesters. She says she's optimistic about the chances of any country where the people are brave enough to take to the streets and fight for their freedom.

"If there are no honest elections and no possibility to bring the authorities to account, then yes, I am for protest actions," she says. "But a revolution is not enough. Getting rid of the people in charge is only part of the problem. Or, rather, it's the creation of new problems."

She would know. In 2004, she was one of the leaders of the Orange Revolution, Ukraine's messy but bloodless uprising, that forced repeat elections and ousted the presidential candidate of the Kremlin and the old guard, Viktor Yanukovich, who was widely believed to have rigged the initial vote. Ms Tymoshenko joined with Viktor Yushchenko, the defeated challenger, to form a progressive pairing that rallied the crowds. They were an extraordinary couple, straight from the pages of a fairy tale – he with his horribly disfigured face, the result of a murky poisoning incident possibly linked to political opponents, and she with her princess-in-the-tower plait. They stood together on the Maidan, Kiev's central square, and promised the crowds a new way of life. Ukraine's outgoing president, Leonid Kuchma, who had backed Mr Yanukovich, bowed to the crowd's demands for new elections, which Mr Yushchenko duly won. He made Ms Tymoshenko his prime minister.

It was a time, like now in the Arab world, when it seemed that people power would sweep away the old, corrupt guard in the former Soviet countries. Many of the leaders had been hanging around since the fall of communism. In Georgia, the young and charismatic Mikheil Saakashvili had already eased into power, brushing away the Soviet Union's last foreign minister and then Georgian President, Eduard Shevardnadze, in the "Rose Revolution". Then came Ukraine and the Orange Revolution. It was followed by Kyrgyzstan's more violent Tulip Revolution and the march seemed unstoppable – names were even allotted to revolutions before they happened, such as Belarus's aborted "Denim Revolution". And although the apathetic Russian populace never seemed close to joining in the protest waves, the Kremlin set about creating sinister youth groups like Nashi, designed to be the footsoldiers of the counter-revolution should any Russians get Orange Fever.

But things didn't quite work out as planned in Ukraine, either. The alliance between Mr Yushchenko and Ms Tymoshenko soon broke down, and her premiership lasted less than a year. In Moscow, her nationalism and populism signified everything the Kremlin despised about the "Colour Revolutions". An arrest warrant over business activities in the 1990s was activated, which meant she couldn't even travel to Russia, and a sitting Russian MP even directed a pornographic film called Yulia, featuring a Tymoshenko lookalike cavorting in a sauna with a doppelgänger of another Kremlin bête noire, Mr Saakashvili. The two chatted in bed about what George W Bush had told them to do.

In 2007, she returned as PM under Mr Yushchenko. The country's political life was lively – open debates on television and fistfights in parliament – but the economy deteriorated. Moscow, which by now despised Mr Yushchenko's nationalism, began to recognise Ms Tymoshenko as their best hope for negotiations; the charges

against her were dropped and she flew into Moscow to negotiate gas prices with Vladimir Putin, who later said it was "comfortable" to deal with her. But the financial crisis hit Ukraine hard, and in last year's elections, Viktor Yanukovich beat Ms Tymoshenko by just 3 per cent of the votes. The general consensus is that Ukraine has gone backwards since Mr Yanukovich took over. He has not proved the Kremlin pawn he was once thought to be and has tried to negotiate a foreign policy that restores good relations with Moscow while furthering European integration. However, media freedoms have been curtailed and high-level corruption appears to be flourishing.

"The authorities have become cynical and their main goal is to get rich," says Ms Tymoshenko. "When they watch the television, many Ukrainians feel they've been transported back... into some distant Brezhnev-era past." Ms Tymoshenko was a businesswoman who is believed to have made a fortune in the 1990s. But she underwent a transformation when she went into politics, switching languages from Russian to Ukrainian, and overhauling her image. The hairstyle was perhaps the main element of the careful rebranding, her long tresses morphed into the blonde plait for which she would become famous. It is an extraordinary hairdo – a centre parting with the hair pulled tightly back and somehow twisted into a plait, which sits like a fat sheaf of wheat on the top of her crown, reminiscent of the halos depicted on the icons of Orthodox saints. When it first appeared, there was so much speculation as to whether the plait was real or not that she undid it at a press conference to prove its authenticity.

Her office doesn't seem to fit with her personality, with its dark-green wallpaper and staid mahogany furniture. It wasn't her choice of decoration. The books are hers though; there aren't many of them, but the titles are telling. Alongside biographies of Margaret Thatcher and Madeleine Albright sit the complete works of Nikolai Gogol. He was a 19th-century Ukrainian-born satirist of governments and bureaucracy, and would doubtless have relished the absurdities of the political systems in both Russia and Ukraine today.

Albright and Thatcher are two of Ms Tymoshenko's political idols; there is also a photograph of Ms Tymoshenko with the former British prime minister displayed in pride of place – they met in 2007 in London.

Ms Tymoshenko is under investigation for misuse of government funds during her premiership; others from her cabinet are in jail. She says the charges are politically trumped up on the orders of Mr Yanukovich. "There's an opinion in Ukraine that all politicians are as corrupt as each other," she says. "But Yanukovich has proved that's not the case. They've had all the government bodies looking into every piece of paper I signed and every kopeck I spent for a year and what have they found? Two accusations of mis-spending, both of which... false."

But while there is little enthusiasm for the Yanukovich government, nobody is rushing to start a revolution. "It's true that after the disappointments of the Orange Revolution, people don't believe as much in revolutions here as they do in other countries," she said. "We need to think about what would come after a revolution or change of power."

The Ukrainian prosecutor has lifted last year's travel ban and tomorrow she will travel to Brussels for the summit of a bloc of European leaders, including Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel. So, does she think she'll be Ukraine's next president, when elections come round in 2015, or even before? She sighs. "Honestly, I don't think about where I'll be a few years from now, I think about where my country will be," she says firmly. "Can we retain our independence; can we become a full member of the European family? Where [I] will be is very much of secondary importance."

Coming from someone whose career has been marked by driving personal ambition, the last part, at least, is highly unconvincing.

A president in waiting?

Born Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, 1960

Family Married to Oleksandr Tymoshenko, a businessman. They have a daughter, Evgeniya, who is married to a heavy metal musician from Leeds

Education PhD in Economics

Career Economist at Dnipropetrovsk machine-building plant 1984; CEO of Ukrainian Petroleum 1991; President of United Energy Systems of Ukraine 1995; Enters parliament in 1996; Elected leader of "Fatherland" party and becomes deputy prime minister 1999; Leads Orange Revolution with Viktor Yushchenko in 2004; appointed Prime

Minister in 2005, but dismissed after nine months; becomes Prime Minister again in 2007; Loses presidential election to Viktor Yanukovich in 2010.

©**independent.co.uk** [Terms & Policies](#) | [Email newsletter](#) | [RSS](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Advertising Guide](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Evening Standard](#) | [Homes & Property](#) | [London Careers](#)