

'No one will destroy us'

Chrystia Freeland

Even in Manhattan's toniest restaurants I have never felt as frumpy as I do walking into the elegant 19th-century mansion in Kiev that serves as the headquarters of the prime minister's political party. The long-haired, high-heeled, short-skirted young women striding through the corridors look like the sisters of the Ukrainian girls that crowd western catwalks, and seem to be dressed by the same couturiers. Yet they are easily outshone by their boss, Yulia Tymoshenko, 47, the rabble-rousing heroine of Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, who sweeps into her office just after 6pm wearing a still-spotless cream-coloured suit and a smile that is just as fresh.

Tymoshenko, who began her second stint as prime minister last December, has had a dramatic, poacher-turned-gamekeeper career, making a fortune in the shadowy gas-trading business before going into government in the 1990s on a corruption-fighting agenda. Her populist appeal was burnished by the Orange Revolution, when her fiery oratory helped rally Ukrainians behind pro-western democrat Viktor Yushchenko's ultimately successful bid for the presidency, in defiance of ballot-stuffing and media control by the pro-Russian incumbent regime.

The Kiev we meet in is a world away from the frozen, euphoric and frightening winter days of the Orange Revolution. Nor does this sunny, late spring afternoon, which most Kievites seem to be enjoying in the city's sidewalk cafes, offer many portents of the anxiety that friends will report a couple of months later, when Russia's invasion of Georgia will have many of them wondering if democratic Ukraine is next.

Before our meal - tea and a plate of delicious-looking pastries that the prime minister doesn't touch, and, so, alas, neither do I - I had made a private vow not to make much of Tymoshenko's looks. Her beauty is so lovingly - even droolingly - featured in most western press accounts that I had long been dismissive of the male reporters who seemed spellbound by their encounter with a woman who was both pretty and powerful.

But the prime minister's physical charm is so potent it works even on a fellow Ukrainian matron like me. Up close she is dazzling both delicate and humming with the animal vitality of the charismatic politician. She opens our conversation with the practised politician's trick of telling me something nice about myself, thus making me feel good while letting me know she is on top of her game.

Her gambit: she thanks me for teaching my daughters Ukrainian. I say they mostly hate me for it but her prime-ministerial endorsement will be useful ammunition in my domestic linguistic wars. Ukraine itself has its own larger battles over language. Tymoshenko comes from Dnipropetrovsk in eastern Ukraine, an area often assumed to be largely Russian-speaking and keen on a closer relationship to the country known in Soviet days as their "big brother".

But, says Tymoshenko, the linguistic character of her region is changing. "When I joined the cabinet for the first time, I didn't speak Ukrainian," she recalls. "But after working in the government for two or three months, I simply began to speak in Ukrainian." The switch was easy for her, and for many urban Russo-phones, because "even if they Russified the city, no one ever Russified the countryside, even after 70 years [of Soviet rule] ... When our grandmothers came to visit, they spoke Ukrainian and we understood them."

Like her fellow Orange Revolutionaries, she thinks language is an important marker of national identity - something you can't take for granted in a state that has been around for less than two decades and has declared independence six times in the past 90 years.

While these subtle shifts between Slavic languages are a big topic in Kiev, they're pretty obscure if you don't happen to be Ukrainian. So I ask Tymoshenko about a more recognisable Ukrainian cultural symbol her trademark coronet of braids. At times, I'm lended on whether the thick blonde plaits were her own - even Ukraininn politicians have to prove that they are "authentic" - Tymoshenko dramatically unpinned and unbraided her hair in a Rapunzel-tike display. Sounding a tittle defensive, she assures me her braids are a family tradition: her village grandmother favoured this style. But, she confides, the real reason she wears her hair this way is simpler than that: it makes her look good. "It is very important for us women how we look. That is an objective fact."

I've just arrived from an America greatly confused about gender and power and beauty, and her matter-of-factness intrigues me. Yet to Tymoshenko - a self-made millionaire, mother and the most powerful European female east of Berlin - none of this seems complicated. "If we are speaking about what is more important for a woman, her work or her looks, the answer is obvious," she tells me, looking a little perplexed that the conversation has drifted to such self-evident matters. "She will choose to look good, above all else, even at the cost of her work."

Tymoshenko cheerfully talks about the differences between men and women in a way that would shock most of us "we-are-all-equal" western feminists. Here are a couple of my favourite assertions: women are better at taking care of things - both kids and countries - than men: "You know how. when a family breaks up. in most instances, the child stays with the mother? She is the more reliable caretaker It is the same with a country. I simply think that we are move reliable and we are more able to give up living a normal life in onder honourably to to fulfil our responsibilities".

Male voters are inevitably scptical about female politicians: "Every man thinks he is more capable than any woman. This is normal Women don't criticise them for this... superiority.

"Her sensible botton line when I ask her if a woman has been a policial vantage? "Sometimes it hurts, sometimes it helps." From a politician who use-beauty as cannily as any supermodel but who also terrifies notorious Russian oligarchs, that sounds like a fair assessment.

She strikes a less balanced note - in fact, she doesn't even try - when the conversation turns to Viktor Yushchenko, the Ukrainian president and her Orange Revolution ally. An economist, talented central banker and former prime minister, Yushchenko is as dramatic a figure as Tymoshenko. He too was known for movie-star good looks, until an attempt to poison him on the eve of the 2004 election left him painfully disfigured.

The enmity between the two of them - the president's supporters see her as a dangerous populist with a poor grasp of economics and a greater commitment to her own career than to the good of the nation - is the country's great political drama, and its political tragedy. Together, they faced down a corrupt government openly backed by Russian president Vladimir Putin. Today, despite their bickering, the Ukrainian economy is growing robustly and the country is democratic and independent. But essential economic reforms are more halting than they should be, especially given the growing aggression of neighbouring Russia.

The problem, she says, is that instead of attending to today's problems, "others" are focused already on the "battle for the presidency in 2010", when Ukraine will have its next election. She tells me she has publicly disavowed any presidential ambitions for 2010 and is prepared to back Yushchenko - if only he will let her - an assertion a little undermined by her also letting slip: "I am certain I would be a better president."

Tymoshenko thinks she is better at reigning in the "political-oligarchic groups", which she sees as the biggest threat to Ukraine's prosperity. Indeed, she believes "corruption has

become the rule, and the norm and, practically, the law" - quite an admission from a country's prime minister - and predicts that one day we will discover that many "billion-dollar bribes" have been paid in Ukraine. The oligarchs, she says proudly, "hate me... they don't understand me because... they cannot buy me or scare me".

Together with Yushchenko, she can also claim credit - as she does over tea - for the reprivatisation of Kryvorizhstal. This steel mill was sold off in the dying days of Ukraine's ancien regime to a consortium of oligarchs including the then president's son-in-law. Tymoshenko led the drive to sell it a second time in an open auction. That sale - shown live on Ukrainian television and won by the Mittals, the London-based steel magnates - fetched \$4.8bn, more than any other privatisation in the former Soviet Union, a damning fact, particularly when you consider Russia's natural resources and the outsize personal fortunes their sell-off created.

For all their sparring, Tymoshenko and Yushchenko have been more united on foreign policy than many expected, with the prime minister moving towards the robust defense of Ukraine's national interest that the president has long espoused. Even before Russia's attack this week on Georgia, she has been measured but forthright in her attitude to the Kremlin.

"Every country should build harmonious relations," says Tymoshenko who surprised many earlier this year by co-signing a letter with Yushchenko asking for Ukrainian admission to NATO. But she also understands that Ukraine's proudest accomplishment - its democratic revolution - makes it a particular target for its authoritarian neighbours. "They fear Ukraine as evidence that a post-Soviet country can effectively build a rule-of-law society and a democratic society," she says. "And this example is very uncomfortable for those who would like to keep everything undemocratic and untransparent."

With apologies for the gloom, my parting question is a bleak one: could Ukraine revert to authoritarianism? Despite repeated and self-serving complaints about dangerous divisions within Ukraine's democratic camp, Tymoshenko strikes a positive note. "We are now immune to that illness," she says decisively. "Today, I see Ukraine's path, perhaps not as swift as we would like, perhaps not as rosy or as serene, but unequivocally in the direction of the creation of a real, European, democratic, rule-of-law state... No one will succeed in plundering our national identity, or humiliating us, or, God forbid, destroying us. For all the difficulties we face, we are moving forward." This week, as Russian tanks rolled into Georgia, that path looks more treacherous.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, August 16/August 17 2008. Life & Arts. p.3.