

Ukraine election: on-the-spot report from Kiev

A fight between millionaires and billionaires

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Opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko has been declared the winner in the third round of the Ukrainian presidential election. He received 52 percent of the vote, while his opponent, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, trailed with 44 percent.

Yushchenko's challenge to Yanukovich, the hand-picked candidate of outgoing President Leonid Kuchma, was openly backed and financed by the US and the European Union, while Yanukovich had the vocal support of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The power shift in Kiev is the product of a concerted drive by the Western powers, above all the US, to strip Russia of its traditional spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, as well as the Caucasus and Central Asia, and gain control of vital oil and gas resources, markets, and sources of cheap labour.

Yanukovich has, as of this writing, refused to concede the election, charging the opposition with vote fraud and calling Yushchenko's election a coup. However, Yanukovich is largely isolated, his main patrons within Ukraine and Russia having indicated their willingness to accede to Yushchenko's victory.

The distribution of votes in Sunday's election demonstrates that the country remains starkly divided. With an election turnout of approximately 75 percent, well over 90 percent voted for Yushchenko in a number of western, Ukrainian speaking regions, while Yanukovich was able to record similar results in eastern regions such as Donetsk and Luhansk, which have strong links to Russia.

The Yushchenko camp has the immediate task of reassuring the eastern Ukrainian oligarchs, who largely backed Yanukovich. For their part, the latter have signalled their readiness to drop their previous threat to

split off from the rest of the country and abandon plans for a referendum on autonomy.

The fact that both parties have nothing in common with the interests of the broad majority of the population was made quite clear in the days and weeks before the final round of the election. Issues that affect the daily existence of the population in this impoverished country and touch on the obscene levels of wealth enjoyed by a narrow ruling layer were discreetly avoided by both sides during the campaign.

Neither side strove to explain how its program would guarantee "a safer future" or an end to "conditions in our country which concern us all." Instead, the most vulgar slogans were thrashed about.

The Yushchenko camp relied on orange scarves and button pins, symbols of its ostensibly democratic "Orange Revolution," buttressed by rock concerts at Kiev's Independence Square featuring Ukrainian pop stars and laser shows.

The Yanukovich camp followed suit, with white-and-blue insignia and its own pop stars, Olympics champions and actors. The official Yushchenko CD was matched by a CD produced for the Yanukovich election campaign, and at public meetings supporters were encouraged to roar out the name Yanukovich syllable-by-syllable, striking themselves three times on the chest.

This cynical electioneering reflects the lack on both sides of a coherent political movement. In the run-up to Sunday's vote, one encountered the most varied opinions, the most interesting of which were those of people who supported neither of the candidates. But the arguments of supporters of one or the other camp also reflected the worries and concerns of broad masses of

people.

This reporter had a number of opportunities to ask ordinary Ukrainians what they thought about the situation in the country and the elections.

Anja, a 21-year-old psychology student, remarked that “the whole election campaign is getting on my nerves.” She believed Yushchenko to be a sympathetic character, but she had doubts about the content of his policies. She was particularly disturbed by the prominence of multi-millionaire oligarch Yulia Timoshenko within the Yushchenko camp. Timoshenko is well known for her utter ruthlessness, Anja noted, pointing to the manner in which she “filled her own pockets” in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Ukraine’s declaration of independence.

Sergei, a 23-year-old taxi driver, thought the election campaign had nothing to offer. “I am an engineer and live from taxi driving,” he said. “If you ask me who I support, I can only say—none of them. I and the population at large will not benefit from either of the candidates. In reality, a fight between billionaires and millionaires is being carried out here.”

Taissa is about 50 and sells spices at a market near the centre of Kiev. She said that, contrary to the majority in the city, she would vote for Yanukovich.

“Yanukovich stands for stability and continuity,” she said. “What will we get out of this artificial Orange Revolution? Every educated person must be repulsed by the way in which, after the second ballot, the Yushchenko people simply drummed together a few young persons and students whom they found in the streets and herded them onto Independence Square. There they got music and something to eat, and since then we have had a ‘revolution’. If Yushchenko wins, the taxes for ordinary people will be raised. Then the standards for Western producers will be imposed, and where will we be then? In this regard, Yushchenko has still to give us an answer.”

When asked about her job during Soviet times, Taissa began to cry. She worked as a food tester in a state ministry. “Whatever happens, the country is now substantially more political than ever before, and the people will examine and follow more closely what politicians are up to,” she concluded.

To Nikolai, a 60-year-old agrarian economist who lives near the eastern industrial city of Dnepropetrovsk,

a vote for Yanukovich was the only option. Only Yanukovich could take action “against the troublemakers from the West who want to sell our economy,” he said. When it was pointed out to him that “our economy” is now in the hands of oligarchs, he responded by saying that Yanukovich would deal with the oligarchs in the same manner as Putin in Moscow. This was the only way to help the country, he felt, but, he added, “I can understand the people in western Ukraine. They want to live like people in Hungary or Poland, where living standards are much higher.”

Vassily, 32, works for the Protestant Church in Kiev. Saying he voted for Yushchenko, he expressed a widespread opinion. “Actually, I do not understand anything about politics, but I believe he is the lesser evil. There is, however, little difference between the two men.”

Natasha, a 25-year-old economics student who sports an orange scarf and is evidently a Yushchenko supporter, declared, “Reforms are necessary to fight corruption. Things can only improve if the power of the oligarchs is broken. They dominate everything—economics, the media, freedom of speech. I am not worried by the fact that the US supports Yushchenko. The main thing is to defeat the oligarchs.”

Natasha was prepared to overlook the fact that Timoshenko was part of the Yushchenko team. After all, she said, Timoshenko had admitted some years back that the way she enriched herself was wrong. “One should give her a second chance.”



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