Yushchenko claims victory in Ukraine presidential election

Justus Leicht, Peter Schwarz
28 December 2004

In all probability, Viktor Yushchenko will be the new president of Ukraine. In the repeat election held December 26, the opposition candidate, who ran with the vocal political support and financial backing of the US and other Western powers, obtained 52 percent of the vote. His opponent, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, who was backed by Russia, gained 44 percent. The election turnout was approximately 75 percent, somewhat less than in the original ballot held November 21.

Yanukovich has, as of this writing, refused to concede defeat and is threatening to challenge the result in the Ukraine Supreme Court. “I will never recognise such a defeat,” he declared, “because the constitution and human rights were violated.” Yanukovich has called the Western-backed challenge to his official victory in the November 21 vote a “coup.”

The opposition declared that election invalid, claiming massive fraud and vote-rigging in eastern Ukraine by the government camp, headed by outgoing President Leonid Kuchma. With the support of the US government and the European Union, Yushchenko and his allies organised large demonstrations in Kiev to demand a new runoff vote between their candidate and Yanukovich, and the Ukraine Supreme Court earlier this month ruled in their favour, overturning the original ruling of the election authorities in favour of Yanukovich and setting December 26 as the date for a revote.

In absolute figures, Yushchenko gained about 850,000 votes and, with a total of 15.1 million, obtained the same result as Yanukovich five weeks ago. The latter lost approximately 1.5 million votes.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming vote for Yanukovich in the government strongholds in the east of the country in the second ballot, despite a massive propaganda campaign by the opposition against Yanukovich in the intervening period, strongly suggests that the opposition claims of systematic vote-rigging on November 21 were highly exaggerated.

Yushchenko declared victory in Sunday’s vote while the counting was still in its early stages, and addressed thousands of supporters in Kiev’s central Independence Square. Yanukovich charged the opposition camp with election fraud and claimed 4.8 million Ukrainians did not vote due to complications and confusion arising from the new election law adopted after the contested November 21 vote.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the lead international organisation monitoring the vote, which had denounced the November 21 ballot as a fraud, dismissed Yanukovich’s charges and said the revote was “substantially closer” to meeting international democratic standards.

“That is not to say the election was perfect,” said Bruce George, head of the OSCE observer mission. “It wasn’t.”

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had intervened in the disputed November 21 ballot to demand a new election, praised the result of the second vote, calling it “a historic moment for democracy.”

There was no comment in the mass media on the irony of a top Bush administration official, who owed his office to a concerted campaign to block the counting of votes in the disputed Florida election of 2000, and the installation by Supreme Court fiat of the loser of the popular vote into the office of US president, demanding an entirely new election in another country and hailing the victory of Washington’s candidate as a triumph for democracy.

Nor was much made of the mysterious death, by gunshot, of Ukraine’s transport minister, Heorhiy Kirpa. A vocal supporter of Yanukovich and target of the wrath of opposition leaders, the 58-year-old Kirpa was found dead at his country house just outside Kiev.

In Sunday’s vote, Yanukovich was able to retain all of his strongholds. As was the case on November 21, 10 of the 27 regions in the country voted for him with a clear majority. He either retained the same proportion of the vote or lost at most 2 to 3 percentage points. In his home region of Donetsk, he won 94 percent instead of 96 percent of the vote, under conditions of a significantly smaller turnout. Donetsk is the centre of Ukrainian heavy industry, and with 3.5 million voters by far the biggest region of the country.

This time around, Yushchenko won 4 percent in Donetsk instead of 2 percent. In his strongholds in the west of the country, however, he was able to increase his vote, in some cases by more than 10 percent. Here, he averaged over 70 percent.

In four regions, he obtained more than 90 percent, and as much as 96 percent in the region of Ternopil. In all, 17 regions in the west and the centre of the country favoured Yushchenko—the same number as on November 21. In the capital and the region around Kiev, he won approximately 80 percent, 5 percent more than in the original ballot.

It is, at present, not possible to pinpoint the reasons for the increased vote for Yushchenko in his strongholds, other than the massive propaganda campaign in his favour. One thing, however, is clear: contrary to his own claims on the evening of the election, Yushchenko does not embody the “Ukrainian nation.” The country is now more deeply divided than it was five weeks ago. A large part of the population deeply mistrusts the future president.

In the east of the country, where its metal and heavy industry is concentrated and a large part of the population speaks Russian, Yanukovich emerged as the clear victor. Besides Donetsk, he won Sevastopol, Luhansk, and Crimea—all with results of more than 80 percent. In other large cities—Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Odessa and Dnepropetrovsk—he obtained results of between 60 and 70 percent.

These results are all the more noteworthy given that a section of the political and economic elite has changed sides since November 21. The outgoing president, Kuchma, dropped his former favourite and assumed a pose of neutrality. As a result, Yanukovich, accused Kuchma of “betrayal” and publicly claimed that the latter had organised the “orange coup.” (Orange is the colour used by the opposition.) In a television debate before the election, Yanukovich even accused Yushchenko of being “Kuchma’s candidate” and his “favourite child.”

The election results indicate that some voters preferred to remain at home or hand in invalid voting cards rather than vote for Yushchenko.

© World Socialist Web Site

Workers in heavy industry fear closures and dismissals if Yushchenko, who favours strict "free market" policies, takes over as president.

The correspondent of the British *Guardian* newspaper quoted a 36-year-old miner from the Donetsk region as saying: "He destroyed the mines. When he was prime minister [1999-2001] we didn't get our wages or pensions. Yanukovich has raised both. If Yushchenko wins, he'll crush us. He wants to import Polish coal. We'll end up selling chickens."

The largely Russian-speaking regions in the south and east of the country are also fearful of discrimination. Towards the end of his campaign, Yushchenko had striven to assuage such fears. He met demonstratively with representatives of Russian organisations and assured them that he did not have "by any means the intention of closing Russian schools and newspapers."

However, Yushchenko rejects proposals to make Russian the second official language. To many who do not speak Ukrainian, this is a clear example of discrimination. In a TV debate between the two candidates, Yanukovich spoke mainly in Russian, while Yushchenko spoke only Ukrainian. He declared that should his opponent be elected, he would be "Moscow's president."

Declaring himself the election winner Monday morning, Yushchenko told thousands of jubilant supporters, "Today the Ukrainian people won." For 14 years, the country had been independent, but not free, he said. "That is now past. Today a new chapter begins in Ukrainian politics."

The Western media's depiction of Yushchenko's election as a "victory for the democracy" not only ignores the deep divisions in the country, it also stands in flagrant contradiction to the programme and character of the Yushchenko camp. The opposition leaders represent not the "rule of the people," but rather international imperialist interests, which have exploited widespread abhorrence of the corrupt and authoritarian Kuchma regime to penetrate a geo-strategically important area and remove it from the sphere of influence of Russia.

In Kiev, what has taken place is not so much a change of power as a reorientation of the economic, foreign and domestic policy of the regime that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the introduction of capitalism. Yushchenko has often stated that he wants to put an end to the rule of the oligarchs and the "Kuchma system." In fact, he himself is closely connected to both.

Born in 1954, Yushchenko became a functionary of the state bank in the 1970s and joined the Communist Party to advance his career. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he was appointed governor of the central bank by Kuchma (1993) and prime minister in 1999. Prior to his appointment as prime minister, Yushchenko had rejected an offer by the opposition to join its presidential election campaign against his mentor.

He followed a strictly neo-liberal course, which led to increased economic growth at the expense of the majority of the working population. Numerous mines were shut down, pensions and real wages sank. This was accompanied by repressive measures carried out by Kuchma, whose gangster methods were symbolised by the murder of the journalist Gongadse. Only after Kuchma ditched Yushchenko in the spring of 2001 did the latter take up the mantle of the opposition and, one year later, found the alliance "Our Ukraine." His alliance extends from economic neo-liberals to Christian Democrats and extreme right-wing nationalists.

Yushchenko's about-turn coincided with increasingly aggressive encroachments by US imperialism into the territory of the former Soviet Union. First, the US established military bases in several Central Asian countries that were formerly Soviet republics. Then, with the so-called "Rose Revolution" of 2003, a US client regime was brought to power in Georgia.

As the Bush administration has admitted, it funnelled $65 million over the past two years—"for the promotion of democracy"—to different Ukrainian opposition groups aligned with Yushchenko's "Orange Revolution." Additional millions came from European governments and private sponsors such as the Soros Foundation.

The main Ukrainian financial backer of Yushchenko's election campaign is the "chocolate king" Petro Poroschenko—a textbook oligarch. He does not limit his activities to the production of sweets. The boss of the diverse company Ukrprominvest, with interests in shipyards, textile plants and mechanical engineering enterprises, he is one of the country's richest men. He made his initial fortune in the 1990s by taking over and reselling bankrupt companies. Another supporter of Yushchenko is David Schvania, who deals in nuclear fuel rods.

The second leading figure in the opposition movement, Yulia Timoshenko, also owes her career to Kuchma and the oligarchs. Born in 1960 in Kuchma's hometown of Dnepropetrovsk, she was able to rapidly climb the ladder to great wealth due to her connections to the governor of the region, Petro Lasarenko.

In 1996, Lasarenko became prime minister and provided Timoshenko with a virtually monopolistic position in the natural gas trade. The Timoshenko-led enterprise Ukraine Combined Energy Systems had a licence to make money hand over fist.

The "beautiful Julia" is alleged to have shifted abroad, tax-free, some $100 million (other sources speak of $1 billion). While Lasarenko ended up in an American prison on charges of extortion, fraud and money laundering, the career of his protégé continued to soar. When Yushchenko was prime minister, he appointed the gas multimillionaire as his deputy prime minister—with responsibility for energy!

With her millions invested comfortably abroad, Timoshenko transformed herself into a champion of clean government, opposing corruption and nepotism and encouraging economic liberalisation—entirely along the lines demanded by international big business, which requires the appropriate legal framework to protect its property before it invests its money in Ukraine. This move brought Timoshenko into conflict with those oligarchs who rely on the state to protect them from foreign competition.

Timoshenko became a "democrat" and created the party Batkivschtschina (Fatherland)—a synthesis of Ukrainian nationalism and support for American imperialism.

Timoshenko is currently being sought by the Russian public prosecutor's office, and she is registered with Interpol. The Ukrainian public prosecutor's office has also been conducting investigations since 2001 into her affairs, focused on charges of tax evasion and falsification of documents.

While Yushchenko has made some efforts to assuage conflicts in the country, at least verbally, Timoshenko incessantly pours oil on the fire. In the event of an election victory, for example, she threatened to fence in Donetsk "with barbed wire."

Programmatic issues were hardly addressed in the election campaign. There was little discussion of the social programmes of both camps, with attention concentrated instead on Yushchenko's alleged dioxin poisoning and authoritarian rule and corruption in general. Once Yushchenko assumes office, however, the social character of his regime will rapidly become clear. As has been the case in Serbia, Georgia and many other eastern European countries where right-wing regimes took power supported by so-called democracy movements, the repressive nature of capitalist rule will soon emerge from behind its democratic mask.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site