

Widespread disaffection in lead-up to Ukrainian presidential elections

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When Viktor Yushchenko became president of Ukraine in December 2004 after having overturned a previous claim of victory by his rival amid widespread accusations of electoral fraud, he claimed that a new democratic era would begin. Five years later, Sunday's presidential election provides a clear refutation of the democratic pretensions of the "Orange Revolution" and its backers in Washington and Western Europe.

Since the mass street protests which led to Yushchenko's winning office, Ukrainian politics has remained mired in official corruption and backroom dealing between oligarchic interests. Yushchenko and his chief lieutenant in 2004, Yulia Tymoshenko, have been in a state of political civil war for years. They and various opposition politicians have formed and broken tentative alliances behind the backs of the electorate in desperate attempts to maintain power. Tymoshenko, who is currently serving her second term as prime minister, and the president reportedly do not speak with each other, despite the deep economic and social crises in Ukraine.

The feeling of ordinary Ukrainians towards this elite is reflected in the extremely low level of interest in the forthcoming election. Unlike in 2004 where there were signs of campaigning and popular interest everywhere in Kiev, today there is little evidence of any public enthusiasm.

This is hardly surprising, given the disillusionment, especially among the youth, following the election of Yushchenko, who is widely despised for presiding over a regime as corrupt as that of his predecessor Leonid Kuchma. At the same time, living standards for ordinary Ukrainians have sharply fallen in the wake of the global financial and economic crisis, which has hit Ukraine especially hard.

In a reflection of the lack of confidence of the population in the democratic institutions of the country, 52 percent of Ukrainians believe that the presidential election results will be rigged, according to a December poll by the Kiev-based International Institute of Sociology. Of this figure, seventeen percent said they were certain that the results would be

falsified and another 35 percent believed that this was likely.

A further 30 percent thought that some fraud would take place, but not enough to change the outcome of the vote. Only seven percent of respondents thought the election would be free and fair.

The two leading candidates in Sunday's election are Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovich, the defeated candidate in 2004.

Yanukovich is leading in the opinion polls with over 30 percent. Garnering the most support in the east and south of Ukraine, he is the chief political face of the Donetsk region industrialists, who were the key constituency of Kuchma. These oligarchs made a fortune from the plundering of formerly nationalized Soviet property, including highly lucrative steel, chemical and mining concerns.

Tymoshenko has polled a distant second for most of the race, with her support hovering around 15 percent. With her husband, Tymoshenko amassed a vast fortune in the 1990s from the export, and some have claimed the theft, of Russian natural gas piped through Ukraine en route to the rest of Europe.

The principal policy difference between these candidates is over the status of cheaply privatized ex-Soviet industries. Yanukovich wants to keep these businesses, bought for a song by politically connected associates of Kuchma, in the hands of his backers, while Tymoshenko wants to renationalize them in order to wrest them away from her rivals before reselling them.

In most other respects Tymoshenko and Yanukovich have adopted very similar domestic positions, promising limited social reforms to help the millions of Ukrainians hit hard by the recession. No more than empty electioneering, these campaign pledges will be ditched; whichever candidate wins will make the working class pay for the virtual bankruptcy of the state. The country's gross domestic production fell by 15 percent in 2009. The economic policies of Ukraine will be dictated by the austere conditions of the \$16.5 billion emergency loan the government has received from the International Monetary Fund.

In foreign policy, too, the leading candidates have very similar positions. In a setback for US interests in the region, both Yanukovich and Timoshenko favor improving relations with Moscow, which were badly damaged by Yushchenko's presidency. Yanukovich opposes Ukrainian membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while Timoshenko effectively holds a similar position by insisting entry must be subject to a referendum; polls show that only a small minority of Ukrainians supports the country's accession to NATO.

In a desperate attempt to discredit his rivals, last week Yushchenko branded Timoshenko and Yanukovich "a single Kremlin coalition" and claimed that the victory of either one would threaten the independence and democratic structures of the country. Polling around 3 or 4 percent, Yushchenko is expected to be humiliated in the election. He has hinted that he plans to retire from politics.

Unlike Yushchenko, who is first and foremost Washington's man in Kiev, his two main rivals reflect powerful big business interests that require functioning relations with Russia. Yanukovich's eastern Ukrainian industrialist backers have close ties to the Russian economy, although they are also rivals of the country's elite. He seeks to improve relations with Moscow while still courting the European Union, which is now Ukraine's largest trading partner.

Timoshenko, having utilized anti-Russian chauvinism in order to win power in 2004, has since adopted a much more conciliatory attitude. In 2008, Timoshenko refused to condemn Russia's overwhelming military response to Georgia's assault on South Ossetia, while President Yushchenko vocally sided with the United States and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. As a reward for her position, the Kremlin invited Timoshenko last year to lead Ukrainian negotiations with the Russian government that brought an end to the two countries' dispute over natural gas prices. Yushchenko was spurned and blamed for causing the crisis.

A Russian-based opinion poll published Wednesday showed a late surge by another candidate, Sergei Tigipko. The poll put him in second place at 14.4 percent, half a percentage ahead of Timoshenko, giving him a strong chance of facing Yanukovich in the second round of voting.

Viewed as close to former president Leonid Kuchma, Tigipko is one of Ukraine's richest men and has poured millions of dollars of his own money into his campaign. He favors closer relations with Russia and the sale of Ukraine's natural gas pipeline network to a Russian-EU consortium.

Tigipko, a former economy minister and chairman of the central bank, was little known until entering the presidential race, and the rapid rise in his polling numbers in the past two

months is another reflection of popular opposition to the better-known politicians.

This was also true of candidate Arseniy Yatseniuk, a 35-year old former protégé of Yushchenko, who set up his own party in 2008. In the middle of last year his candidacy enjoyed rapidly rising polling figures but ultimately failed to win lasting public support. Polling in the single-digits, he has reportedly made a deal to throw his weight behind Timoshenko if she goes forward to the second round vote.

Preparing for a loss to her main rival, Yanukovich, and possibly also elimination in the first round thanks to Tigipko, Timoshenko has returned to the playbook of the "Orange Revolution." As well as attempting to cultivate a following among youth through organizing rock concerts and endorsements by Ukrainian celebrities, Timoshenko has warned of plans for a "deliberate disruption of the election process" on behalf of Yanukovich.

Timoshenko alleges that Yanukovich's Party of the Regions is organizing fraudulent absentee ballots in the Donetsk region. Claiming that 11 percent of the electorate in the area had registered to vote from home, Timoshenko stated that the potentially "monstrous" scale of voter fraud could exceed that alleged in 2004. She has threatened to take any disputed results to the courts.

Yanukovich has responded by saying that it is Timoshenko, as prime minister, who is able to manipulate the elections, as she controls the interior ministry.

Reflecting concerns that there could be a repeat of 2004's mass protests—this time under conditions of economic crisis and widespread opposition to all parties—a Ukrainian court has issued a three week ban on all rallies in Independence Square in Kiev, the epicenter of the "Orange Revolution."



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