

Ukraine election marks declining US influence in region

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The humiliating defeat of incumbent Viktor Yushchenko in Sunday's Ukrainian presidential election represents a serious blow to the strategic interests of the US, which backed his coming to power through the "Orange Revolution" in 2004.

Winning just 5 percent of the vote, the electorate issued a clear rejection of Yushchenko. Having campaigned in 2004 on a platform of opposition to corruption and the domination of the country by oligarchic businessmen, his administration has since become synonymous with these very things.

The candidate with the most support in Sunday's poll was Viktor Yanukovich, the man Yushchenko defeated in a third round of voting in 2004. Winning 35 percent of the vote, Yanukovich will go forward to a second round run-off. There he will face the second-place candidate, Yulia Timoshenko. Currently serving as prime minister, Timoshenko garnered 25 percent of Sunday's ballots.

Reflecting widespread opposition to all the candidates, turnout fell to 67 percent of registered voters, down from 75 percent in the 2004 first round. Almost one million ballots were marked "against all" or were spoiled.

The election results were a repudiation of the country's "Orange Revolution," which was a *de facto* coup sponsored by Washington to replace one clique of oligarchs—those who maintained close relations with Russia—with another group—those beholden to US imperialism.

This was part of an aggressive strategy by Washington to weaken the power of Russia in the former Soviet region through backing a series of pro-US "reform" movements, including the "Bulldozer Revolution" in Serbia (2000), the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia (2003), and abortive attempts to foment regime change in Belarus.

In each of these countries, the US State Department and various Washington-based organizations with close connections to the government gave training and material support to opposition groups, particularly those based among student youth. These groups, in turn, provided personnel for the campaigns of candidates—invariably former members of the regimes they sought to replace—who had been vetted and

backed by the White House.

This attempt to create a "New Europe," in the phrase of former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, of pro-US regimes in the former Soviet sphere was of a piece with Washington's wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, which are aimed at securing control over energy resources and transit routes at the expense of rivals, especially Russia.

The signature policy of Yushchenko, which has been rejected by large majorities in numerous polls, has been membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He has also backed Washington's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2008 Yushchenko was a vocal supporter of Georgia's US-backed attack on the pro-Russian breakaway province of South Ossetia.

Yushchenko has presided over a sharp lowering of the living standards of the population, as jobs and wages have been cut as a result of the global recession. Ukraine's gross domestic production fell by 15 percent in 2009, as its financial system teetered on the brink of collapse and international orders for its industrial products plummeted. Faced with insolvency, Ukraine was granted an emergency loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the onerous conditions of which will ensure that workers are made to pay for the economic crisis.

While a leading figure in the "Orange Revolution," second-place candidate Timoshenko had since become a bitter rival of Yushchenko, who dismissed her as prime minister in late 2005. The two renewed a tentative parliamentary alliance in 2007, but remained in constant conflict, accusing each other of corruption, authoritarianism and treason.

Reflecting the interests of Ukrainian big business, which remains closely tied to Russia, especially in the energy sector, both Timoshenko and Yanukovich favor repairing relations with Moscow that were badly damaged by the Yushchenko presidency. Both candidates have, in effect, the same policy against Ukrainian membership in NATO, with Yanukovich rejecting the idea outright and Timoshenko insisting that accession to the military alliance be subject to a referendum.

Third place candidate Sergiy Tigipko, who polled 13 percent, also favors rapprochement with Moscow. Seen as closer to Yanukovich's circle but a possible ally of Timoshenko, the multi-millionaire could be a kingmaker in the second round of the election, scheduled to take place February 7.

Timoshenko and Yanukovich also support closer relations with the European Union (EU), which is now Ukraine's largest trading partner. Germany, the largest economy in Europe, has tacitly opposed Ukraine's membership in NATO as too destabilizing to its growing economic and strategic relations with Russia.

The similarity of the policies of Timoshenko and Yanukovich towards Russia and NATO is a sharp departure from the 2004 campaign. During the "Orange Revolution" Timoshenko frequently used anti-Russian rhetoric in an appeal to both Ukrainian chauvinism and Washington. She maintained this line in a piece published in the May-June 2007 issue of the US journal *Foreign Affairs*, in which she urged the US and the EU to respond strongly to "Russia's long-standing expansionism."

In 2008, in a reflection of the declining position of US imperialism in the region, as well as the fact that Washington continued to back Yushchenko, Timoshenko performed an about turn and adopted a conciliatory attitude towards Moscow.

The debacle of the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia expressed the limitations of US imperialism to the Ukrainian elite. The overwhelming Russian military response to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia was a clear sign that Moscow would assert its interests in the former Soviet region regardless of the backing given to Tbilisi—or Kiev—by the United States.

The outgoing Bush administration issued bellicose statements condemning Russian "aggression" and sent a Navy detachment to the Georgian coast in order to deter further encroachment by Moscow into the country. While there is newly released evidence that the White House had intended to take military action against Russia and only reversed course at the last minute, Washington ultimately failed to prevent a crushing defeat of its client regime in Tbilisi and a consolidation of the Kremlin's control over the breakaway Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Unlike Yushchenko's vociferous backing of Saakashvili, Timoshenko refused to condemn the Russian counterattack. This silence reflected growing concerns within even the pro-Western section of the political establishment about siding decisively with Washington at the expense of relations with Moscow.

Timoshenko was rewarded for this the following year,

when in January 2009 the Kremlin invited her to head talks with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, which brought an end to a major dispute between the two countries over payments and prices for natural gas that had cut off supplies to much of Central Europe.

Additionally, Timoshenko's thinking has been affected by the world economic crisis and the ongoing military quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan, both of which signify a further weakening in Washington's global position.

Yanukovich and Timoshenko remain bitter rivals despite the closeness of the two candidates in terms of foreign policy, and the fact that, whoever wins, the IMF and the EU will largely dictate domestic economic policy. This reflects their personal interests, and those of the rival cliques of oligarchs around them. While Yanukovich is a representative of industrialists based in the Donetsk region who benefited from sweetheart deals privatizing former Soviet enterprises in the 1990s, Timoshenko seeks to use the power of the state to wrest control of many of these businesses away from her rivals in order to resell them, to the benefit of her backers in Ukraine, as well as transnational companies—including sections of Russian capital.

With such stakes in play, and in preparation for a close race, both camps have accused each other of preparing electoral fraud. Though Ukrainian and international monitors stated that the first round met acceptable election standards, Timoshenko accused her rival of preparing a "monstrous" vote-rigging scheme involving postal ballots in Donetsk. For his part, Yanukovich suggested that the prime minister was attempting to influence the chairman of the electoral commission and use the interior ministry to rig the vote.

As in 2004, both sides lack any serious attachment to democracy, a symptom of the vast social chasm that separates the Ukrainian elite from the broad mass of the population.



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