

# Political turmoil continues in Ukraine after presidential election

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Ukraine remains embroiled in political conflict after last weekend's run-off election that gave the presidency to Viktor Yanukovich, who defeated rival Yulia Timoshenko by a margin of just over 3 percent.

Despite the endorsement of the results by international monitors and a pronouncement by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that the election process met acceptable standards, Timoshenko, who is currently serving as prime minister, refuses to concede defeat and insists that she will challenge Yanukovich's win in court.

According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), which is expected to officially certify the results on February 17, Yanukovich won 48.95 percent of the vote to Timoshenko's 45.47 percent. A further 4.36 percent of those who cast ballots, or 1.1 million people, rejected both candidates and marked "against all."

The outcome of the election marks a new stage in the reversal of Ukraine's US-backed "Orange Revolution." At that time in 2004, an electoral victory by Yanukovich, who was closely aligned with Russia, was successfully overturned through street protests and legal challenges led by forces funded by Washington. This resulted in the installation of a pro-US regime in Kiev, closely tied to the Bush administration, under the leadership of President Viktor Yushchenko.

Yanukovich's victory over Timoshenko, an "Orange revolutionary" and close associate of Yushchenko in 2004, is a setback for the White House at a time when tensions between the US and Russia continue to grow.

The growth of political instability, fueled by rivalry between oligarchic factions and the ongoing economic crisis in Ukraine, is a further cause for concern for Washington and Europe, which receives significant amounts of its energy supplies through pipelines that cross Ukraine.

Timoshenko is refusing to agree to Yanukovich's demands that she concede defeat. She insists that serious violations of democratic procedure occurred at upwards of 900 polling stations and is demanding that the votes be recalculated at these locations. She is threatening to block Yanukovich's assumption of the presidency through legal challenges.

As the head of the CEC, Volodimir Shapoval, recently noted,

"Declarations of mass fraud are a form of political war."

Thus far, Timoshenko's criticisms of the election have failed to gain support within the broader population. There have been no widespread opposition rallies in Kiev or other major centers. While Timoshenko is known for her use of the media to remain in the public eye and whip up popular sentiment, she has largely hidden from view over the course of the past week, calling off press conferences and scheduled appearances.

Despite adopting a seemingly intransigent stance on the election's outcome, Timoshenko's relative silence is an expression of the crisis within her own ranks over what to do about her loss. She is coming under significant pressure from the West to concede to Yanukovich, with the US and the major European powers, as well as Russia, having now openly congratulated Yanukovich on his win.

However, even if Timoshenko backs off in the current confrontation, Ukraine remains a politically divided country.

The bloc of parties over which Timoshenko presides in the Ukrainian parliament holds more seats than those allied to Yanukovich. Even if the president-elect dissolves the legislature and calls new elections, as is generally expected, there is no guarantee that he will win a majority. As one commentator in *Ukrainska Pravda* observed, "The main result of these elections is that Yanukovich came first, but did not win. Timoshenko, on the other hand, lost but was not defeated."

It is highly likely that Timoshenko will hold onto the premiership under these conditions, creating a situation of continual political conflict. She is already gearing up for this, insisting this week that Yanukovich's election promises to wage a war on poverty and other social ills were empty sloganeering.

In this regard she will prove correct. The major issue confronting Ukraine now is the fate of a \$16.4 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), secured by the government last year as the country's economy went into a tailspin, with gross domestic product falling by 15 percent in 2009, fueled by a collapse in steel exports. The terms of that loan include a significant reduction in government outlays.

As a February 10 article in *Bloomberg* reported, "The IMF wants a commitment to spending cuts that narrow the budget

deficit by about a third from its 2009 level of about 13 percent of gross domestic product, a reduction of energy subsidies and a consolidated banking industry. Lawmakers have yet to approve a 2010 budget, leaving emergency funding in limbo and calling into question Ukraine's ability to continue paying for Russian gas that is shipped to Europe."

In order to secure the release of the remainder of the IMF funds, Yanukovich will have to impose an austerity budget, including the reversal of populist measures taken by Yushchenko during 2009—such as a 20 percent increase in pensions—that were aimed at staving off widespread social unrest and improving his chances in the presidential race.

Yanukovich has already promised the international financial community that he will do what it takes to meet the IMF's demands and bring Ukraine's fiscal house in order.

The slashing of government expenditures and the worsening of living standards will provoke mass opposition, which Timoshenko will likely try to exploit to advance her own political fortunes. However, the experiences of the past six years, during which the Orange Revolution yielded nothing for the broader population other than a more thoroughly entrenched and corrupt ruling elite, have fueled general political disaffection. The humiliating defeat of Yushchenko, leader of the Orange Revolution, in the recent election—he won 5 percent of the vote in the first round and was excluded from the runoff—is testament to gulf that has emerged between popular sentiment and official politics.

A February 8 article in *Bloomberg* cites James Sherr, head of the Russia and Eurasia program at the UK-based Chatham House, as describing "[t]he mood in the country towards [Yanukovich and Timoshenko]" in the lead-up to the elections as "one of fatigue and cynicism." He observed, "They are both seen by a very large proportion of people in relatively negative terms."

The political situation in Ukraine is causing nervousness in Washington. Despite efforts by the White House and the media to paint a positive picture by saying that the OSCE's affirmation of the fairness of the Ukrainian election is a welcome boon for democracy, the outcome is a significant setback for Washington's drive to install a bloc of pro-US regimes in the former Soviet sphere.

In the immediate aftermath of the news of his victory, Yanukovich issued a statement on the website of his Party of Regions affirming his desire to strengthen ties with Moscow. "Relations with Russia and the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] will be priorities for us.... We will clear the bottlenecks of misunderstanding and old problems created during the years of 'Orange' power," he stated.

More generally, the election and political events in Ukraine since 2004 serve as an exposure of the right-wing program behind the US-backed "color" revolutions and the fraudulent nature of their claims to embody the democratic aspirations of the population. At the same time, Yanukovich represents a

competing faction of the same reactionary and privileged Ukrainian elite.

Washington has responded to Yanukovich's victory by putting him on notice, making it clear that while his election will go unchallenged, his actions will be watched very closely and his government undermined if he steps too far out of line.

Steven Pifer, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and top US diplomat in Ukraine from 1998 to 2004 under presidents Clinton and Bush—that is, in the years leading up to and including the Orange Revolution—wrote the following in an opinion piece on February 10 in the *New York Times*:

"The West welcomes Mr. Yanukovich as the democratically elected leader of Ukraine. However, a reversal of the democratic progress that Kiev has made in the past five years would have profoundly negative consequences for relations with the West.... [T]he West will assess his seriousness by the seriousness of his policies.... Should Mr. Yanukovich avoid crucial actions such as energy sector reform, that is his choice...[b]ut Washington and Brussels should make clear that in such circumstances, Kiev should not expect the West to extend itself by intervening, for example, with the International Monetary Fund to cut Ukraine slack on meeting its loan obligations."

In an editorial on February 9 that is striking for its imperialist hubris, the *Washington Post* was even more explicit, particularly with regards to Ukraine's ties with Russia. "In the longer term," the *Post* wrote, "Mr. Yanukovich will show whether he is committed to liberal democracy.... If [he] passes those tests, Ukraine will remain a sovereign European country—and Mr. Putin's authoritarian project will be doomed. That's why it's vital that the United States and other Western governments not turn their backs on Ukraine. The Orange Revolution lives on, for now—but it will need plenty of support and nurturing in the next few years."

In short, Ukraine's sovereignty is a gift from Washington, which it should use wisely, i.e., in a way favorable to US interests in the region, lest it be revoked.



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