

RUFS Briefing No. 2, January 2010

The Ukrainian Presidential Elections – All Oranges Sold Out

On January 17, 2010, Ukraine will experience its first presidential election since the Orange Revolution that swept Viktor Yushchenko to power in 2004. For many Ukrainians, however, the past five years have replaced high expectations and post-revolution fervour with grave disappointment. Ukraine is still a highly corrupt, oligarch-ruled country with little respect for the rule of law. Ever-evolving political crises have stalled the reform process, and the economic downturn in 2008 hit Ukraine severely. Yushchenko's pro-Western policies have not led Ukraine any closer to membership in the European Union or NATO, and many Ukrainians blame him for the serious deterioration in Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Yushchenko's failure to deliver on the promises he made on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the downtown Kyiv square that became the centre for mass rallies during the Orange Revolution, has resulted in a drastic fall in his popular support. Therefore, this election will likely be a battle between his former rival, Viktor Yanukovych, and current Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, Yushchenko's erstwhile ally. None of the 18 candidates are projected to win the required 50 percent of the votes in the first round, so a runoff between the two candidates with the most popular votes will likely take place on February 7, 2010.

During the campaign, Yushchenko has taken every opportunity to attack Tymoshenko. In contrast, he has only rarely criticised Yanukovych, a curious move that has spurred rumours that the former foes agreed to a secret power sharing agreement in order to thwart Tymoshenko. The former struggle between the "Orange" and "Blue" factions that dominated the 2004 elections is no longer of interest; the main political rivalry has shifted to the internal ranks of the former Orange camp.

This year's election campaign has differed immensely from that of 2004. A striking distinction lay in the lack of ideology that characterizes the contest. In 2004, the elections took place against the backdrop of Leonid Kuchma's regime and its wrongdoings. Thus, many Ukrainians felt obligated to make a moral choice between justice and truth on one hand, and deceit and corruption on the other. To some extent, this choice was also perceived as one between "West" (principles of rule of law, openness, media freedom, etc.) and "East" (a representation of the Russian system of managed democracy).

The current campaign is more about pragmatism than ideology, and the question is no longer about who is the morally superior leader, but rather about who can get the job done. The political and economic crises facing Ukrainians make them more concerned about bread-and-butter issues than the abstract goals of nation building. They are interested in neither a break with the past nor a revolutionary leader, but rather in political and economic stability. Consequently, the strong ideological component of Yushchenko's message, which was effective in 2004, has failed to resonate in this campaign, resulting in single digit ratings for him.

Another distinction between 2004 and 2010 is that civil society five years ago was mobilized in support of democratic elections, showing up in droves to protest in Kyiv. This time, the electorate has assumed the role of passive observer rather than fervent protester. There are several reasons for this apathy; foremost among them is the disappointment in the broken promises of the Maidan. The Ukrainian media, however, is no longer censored the way it was

in 2004, the major – and some say only – achievement of the Orange Revolution. Citizens are better informed and no longer need to attend rallies to listen to their leaders and become educated about the true state of affairs. However, political leaders of different camps have perverted demonstrations since the Orange Revolution by paying participants to join their respective rallies. Material payments in exchange for participating in political rallies are therefore an unfortunate commonplace in today's political landscape.

In what could be called the “end of geopolitics” in Ukraine, neither the West nor Russia is directly involved in the election. The West's absence in particular is a significant departure from 2004. This is a reflection of mass disappointment in the lack of reforms during the last five years, and in the rampant political turmoil that stifled them. According to Transparency International, corruption in today's Ukraine resembles pre-Orange Revolution levels. Further, the so-called “enlargement fatigue” within the EU, as well as the August War between Russia and Georgia in 2008, which underlined the reluctance of certain European countries to include Ukraine in NATO against Russia's will, has contributed to a “Ukraine fatigue” in the West. Western leaders now seem to doubt that a new president in Ukraine will effect any significant change.

From the Russian perspective, the Kremlin learned from its mistakes in 2004, when Moscow's heavy-handed involvement produced more harm than good. This time, the main candidates – excluding Yushchenko – are in favour of a more pragmatic attitude toward Russia, and have expressed the need to improve Ukrainian-Russian relations as their top foreign policy priority. Moscow has also spread its favour over several candidates in a careful attempt not to keep its eggs in one basket. Analysts believe Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's inner circle prefers a Yanukovych victory, while Tymoshenko is the favourite of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

During a meeting with Tymoshenko in Yalta in November 2009, Putin cited their “special relationship” as the reason why Russia did not enforce sanctions after Ukraine's failure to pay its gas debt to Gazprom. This is a clear departure from earlier discussions between the two countries, during which Russia consistently emphasized a strictly pragmatic nature of its relations with Ukraine. As the leading candidates actively campaign on their lack of hostility toward Russia, it is reasonable to expect an improvement in Ukrainian-Russian relations after the election. The new president will likely try to set a positive agenda, as did Yushchenko at first when he travelled to Moscow following his inauguration.

In the long run, it is important to stress that none of the candidates are considered “pro-Russian” in the sense that Moscow would prefer them to be. The national priorities of Ukraine and Russia regarding foreign policy, economy, trade, and energy issues have diverged to such an extent that disagreements and conflicts will not disappear overnight. Furthermore, Ukraine's relations with the EU and NATO will continue, even without membership on the agenda in the near future, and this will continue to counterbalance Russia's influence.

More on the Ukraine's 2010 Election Watch Blog:

<http://www.utoronto.ca/jacyk/ElectionWatch/Blog/Blog.html>

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