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Ukraine's 2006 parliamentary elections: first conclusions

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Ukraine's 2006 Parliamentary Elections: First Conclusions

by Tammy Lynch

With over 95% of the votes counted in Ukraine's parliamentary elections, it appears that early exit poll predictions were accurate. Former Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions should poll around 30-32% when counting is complete, while former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's eponymous bloc will place a strong second with 22-23%, and President Viktor Yushenko's party Our Ukraine – which campaigned under the slogan “For Yushchenko” – will trail in third with around 15% of the vote.

The extent, but not the fact, of the loss for Yushchenko is surprising. While many in Ukraine have noted disillusionment with the president's policies and what has become known as “his environment,” there always was uncertainty about where protest votes would go. It now appears that the vast majority went to Tymoshenko.

It also appears that the combined votes of Yushchenko's Our Ukraine, the Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko (BYUT) and the Socialists would provide a workable parliamentary majority of between 230 and 260 seats, depending on the redistribution of votes for parties failing to pass the threshold. This coalition would represent a return to the original revolution “orange coalition.” By virtue of BYUT's placement well ahead of Our Ukraine and the Socialists, under Ukraine's new constitutional amendments creating a parliamentary–presidential form of government, Tymoshenko is claiming the right to the Prime Minister's chair in this potential coalition.

However, in remarks to several journalists following her press conference on 27 March, Tymoshenko said that “those interested in mixing business with politics” in Our Ukraine are “interested in a coalition with the Party of Regions.” She continued, “They don’t want me as Prime Minister because they know I won’t stand for that.” Nevertheless, she expressed optimism about a return to an orange coalition after a meeting on 28 March with the president, and it would appear that public opinion supports this idea.

An examination of the election results leads to several conclusions:

1) President Yushchenko ensured that the election campaign would meet or surpass international standards for a free and fair election. Despite understanding for months that his party could be beaten, Yushchenko did not resort to the tactics used by so many other leaders of former Soviet republics. Instead, he remained true to the democratic principles he has espoused during his entire career. The campaign was vibrant, diverse, unencumbered by administrative pressure, and chronicled by an uncensored media, according to all accredited international election monitoring organizations. As confirmed by the OSCE, it was a true democratic contest.

Several smaller parties have filed complaints about vote counting issues, and both Our Ukraine and BYUT have charged that certain election officials clinging to the old ways in Donetsk, Crimea and Luhansk conducted fraudulent vote counts. However, there is no question from any international monitoring mission that this election constitutes a major step forward for Ukraine. President Yushchenko should be congratulated.

2) Unlike some reports suggesting that these elections signify a “shift to Russia,” in fact, they actually demonstrate a further consolidation of support for the goals of the Orange Revolution. It is easy to forget that Viktor Yanukovich won 44% of

the vote during the third round of the presidential election in December 2004 – an election deemed fair by international observers. This time he received about 32% of the vote.

Even when votes for the Communists (4%), the staunchly pro-Russian opposition bloc of Natalia Vitrenko (around 3%), and a few other anti-Yushchenko parties that will not enter the parliament are added to the total for the Party of Regions, the views of Yanukovich do not appear to have gained support. In fact, it may be that these views actually have lost support.

3) The election results actually show a migration not from Yushchenko to Yanukovich, but from Yushchenko to other more “radical” former orange partners. Tymoshenko, of course, received the largest share of former Yushchenko votes (increasing her bloc’s representation from slightly more than 7% in 2002).

However, the Socialist Party also received about 6% of the votes that supported Yushchenko in 2004, and the two former orange partners, Reforms and Order (in coalition with PORA) and the People’s Rukh (Kostenko), also will gain over 4% together, even if their support will not be enough to keep them in parliament. The Green and Viche parties also seem to have secured around two percentage points together – votes that likely would have gone to Yushchenko in 2004.

4) The results should send a clear message to President Yushchenko that “orange” voters want their two revolution leaders united. In the final three weeks of the campaign, Tymoshenko repeatedly suggested that only by voting for her could the orange team be reunited. Vote for her, she said, to send a message to Our Ukraine, and “to reunite the team.” Our Ukraine, in contrast, asked voters to support them to make it clear that Tymoshenko “will be a junior partner in any coalition.” The voters seem to have rejected this idea handily and embraced Tymoshenko’s suggestion that the team would be reunited with her “victory.”

5) Voters rejected President Yushchenko's repeated suggestions that most everything wrong with the country in the last year was the fault of former Prime Minister Tymoshenko. While Yushchenko was hoping for a mandate for his programs, it was the former prime minister who actually received the "thumbs up" from most orange voters.

6) Should President Yushchenko ignore the message that his core voters want him to reunite with Tymoshenko, he risks undermining his political support even further, possibly dooming his reelection campaign and catapulting Tymoshenko into the office of president.

7) Yushchenko now can no longer count himself as the sole leader of the "orange voters." To maintain—or perhaps resurrect—his political career, he will need to define himself in new ways, based on specific programs. So far, he and Our Ukraine have been unable to do this. Simply campaigning under the slogan "For Yushchenko" no longer produces the required result.

8) "Orange" voters continue to want "change" and "justice." Tymoshenko's primary slogan throughout her entire campaign was, "It is necessary to fight for justice." It is important to remember that when protestors stood on the Maidan, they did not chant in favor of standardizing customs procedures with the EU. They chanted, "Bandits to jail!" and "Criminals Gone." Not one "orange" voter, interviewed prior to this article or quoted in other articles, has mentioned the economy as a motivating factor behind their choice on 26 March, just as it was not a major motivating factor in 2004. Living standards already were increasing under President Kuchma, and continue to do so.

Instead, interviewees have noted that the organizers of the Gongadze murder remain at large, that certain business interests have maintained control of reportedly improperly privatized enterprises, and that no major figure has been

punished for the vote fraud that led to the revolution. Voters clearly responded to Tymoshenko's slogan, and her repeated calls for "justice."

9) Voters responded to Tymoshenko's admonition to choose their leaders "in the interests of Ukraine," and not other countries. The former Prime Minister effectively used the negative comments about her and her policies from both Russian and Western analysts and economists during her campaign. She particularly singled out the former Carnegie Endowment for International Affairs Director for Russia, Anders Aslund, whose negative evaluations of Tymoshenko, support for Yushchenko, and campaigning for a coalition between Yushchenko and Yanukovich were carried extensively in the Ukrainian press. One Tymoshenko voter interviewed suggested that she wanted "a leader for Ukraine's interests, not Russia's or America's."

10) Voters have cleansed the parliament of individuals implicated in some of the country's most notorious crimes. Although the Party of Regions parliamentary list contains over a dozen individuals said by the Interior Ministry to be under investigation for various crimes, voters rejected the return to parliament of the "Ne Tak" opposition bloc and the bloc of parliamentary speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn. The "Ne Tak" bloc held many of the members of the former Kuchma party of power, the Social Democratic Party (united), including former Presidential Chief of Staff Viktor Medvedchuk. It was led by former Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk. According to a Ukrainian parliamentary commission and the European Court of Human Rights, Volodymyr Lytvyn may be implicated in the original plan to kidnap Georgiy Gongadze (who then was killed), and is heard on the "Gongadze tapes" advising President Kuchma to have the Interior Minister "handle" Gongadze. These individuals have now lost their parliamentary immunity, bringing up interesting questions for the next government, and the next prosecutor general.

As this article is completed, Yushchenko, Tymoshenko and Socialist leader Oleksandr Moroz all have stated their support for the “principle” of a new “democratic coalition” based on the former orange parties. The country has come far with the successful completion of its first truly free election. Should majority coalition negotiations proceed effectively, not a simple task given the personal animosity between Yushchenko and Tymshenko, Ukraine truly will be able to say that it is on the path to Western-style democracy.

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