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Taras Kuzio: Euromaidan and Ukraine's 2014 presidential elections

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From left is Volodymyr Semynozhenko, Petro Poroshenko (Party of Ukrainian Solidarity), Volodymyr Rybak (Party of Regional Revival), Valentyn Landyk (Labor Party), unknown leader of Party of Pensioners and Leonid Chernovetsky (Party for a Beautiful Ukraine). Originally in 2000 called the Party of Regional Revival- 'Labour Solidarity Ukraine' it changed its name to the Party of Regions in 2001. The Party of Regions was led by Mykola Azarov (2001 and 2010-2014), Semynozhenko (2001-2003) and Yanukovych (2003-2010).

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The choice for Ukrainian voters is quite poor, as though the four-month Euromaidan Revolution never took place in search of a new Ukraine.

A total of 24 candidates (out of 46 who attempted to stand) have been registered, which is more than in 2010 (18) and similar to the number in 2004 (26). As in every Ukrainian presidential election, there are two front-runners, which this time round are Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, both of whom are not new faces.

The 24 candidates in next month's election should be divided into three groups: (1) independents and narcissists; (2) ancien regime; and (3) former opposition. Among my two favourites in the first group is Oleh Lyashko, a clown from the virtual Radical Party, and a consultant to the chairman of Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence Service.

Of the 10 candidates from the former ancien regime, seven are from or linked to the Party of Regions reflecting internal divisions following the fleeing of President Viktor Yanukovych from Ukraine. The other

three include the Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko who has found the huge deposit to enable him to stand in each election, a former disgraced Socialist Party leader and Jewish-Ukrainian oligarch.

The former opposition has ignored numerous calls over the years for unity and put forward eight candidates. These include three from marginal nationalist parties, Svoboda (Freedom) party leader Oleh Tyahnybok, former Defence Minister Anatoliy Grytensko and the two leading candidate Poroshenko and Tymoshenko. One wonders where many of these marginal political leaders found 2.5 million hryvnya (\$200,000) as the deposit they will lose when they do not enter the second round.

Where for example did Dmytro Yarosh suspiciously find the \$200,000 deposit when Right Sector emerged from nowhere in the Euromaidan? Indeed, would it not have been more patriotic for Grytensko and four nationalist leaders from Rukh, Svoboda, Right Sector and the People's Party (UNP) to donate their combined one million dollar deposits at a time of government cutbacks and financial crisis to Ukraine's newly formed National Guard?

Poroshenko increasingly resembles Labor Party leader Neil Kinnock who held a hubristic victory rally in Sheffield a week before the April 1992 British elections. Arrogant and smug Poroshenko, with surprisingly high ratings, already believes he has won the May elections but, just to make sure, his campaign team called last week upon Tymoshenko to withdraw her candidacy, which she refused. Kinnock never called upon Conservative party leader John Major to withdraw but nevertheless was defeated. What awaits Poroshenko is unclear at this stage but the undemocratic call on Tymoshenko to step down will inevitably come back to haunt him.

Unpleasantly, Ukraine's 2014 election campaign takes us back in time to the early orange years when Poroshenko was secretary of the National Security & Defense Council (RNBO) and Tymoshenko was prime minister.

President Viktor Yushchenko had installed Poroshenko in the RNBO as an alternative government and their spats led to a political crisis in September 2005 when the government was dismissed. As on other occasions, orange divisions opened up the path for defeated candidate Yanukovich and the Party of Regions he led to return to power.

Poroshenko's high levels of support do not fit well with a country that has gone through a revolution where over 100 protesters were murdered by security forces. After having gone through an anti-oligarch revolution do Ukrainians really wish to elect an oligarch who was a founding leader of the Party of Regions and ally of President Leonid Kuchma? Do Ukrainians wish to replace violent kleptocrat Yanukovich with Yanukovich-Lite? As a master of Byzantine politics, Poroshenko has increased his wealth under every Ukrainian President and Prime Minister.

There have been three constants in Poroshenko's career. Firstly, he is the epitome of Ukraine's flip flopping political and business elite. Secondly, he has always been a supporter of grand coalitions between Our Ukraine-Party of Regions and arch enemy of Tymoshenko. Thirdly, he has created three virtual parties with Solidarity in the title, two of which were merged into the Party of Regions (2000) and

People's Union-Our Ukraine (2005) and a third he has aligned with Vitaliy Klitschko's equally virtual UDAR (Ukrainian Alliance for Democratic Reforms).

Indeed, it is not surprising therefore three political forces are backing Poroshenko. These include UDAR, the successor to the pragmatic, anti-Tymoshenko wing of Our Ukraine, former Kyiv Mayor Leonid ("Cosmo") Chernovetsky who is another founding member of the Party of Regions, and the gas lobby who have successfully worked with every Ukrainian president and prime minister except Tymoshenko.

Poroshenko was first elected into parliament in 1998 within the SDPUo (Social Democratic Party of Ukraine united) headed by the odious Viktor Medvedchuk (1998), donated one of five parties that merged into the Party of Regions (2000), moved to Yushchenko's Our Ukraine (2002), backed Arseniy Yatseniuk's Front for Change (2008) and his 2010 election campaign, and joined Mykola Azarov's government (2012). Poroshenko continues to profusely deny he is to be found on the tapes made in Kuchma's office by security guard Mykola Melnychenko, which is a patent falsity, where he asks for money to bribe parliamentary deputies to defect to the Solidarity faction and swears his undying allegiance to Kuchma.

In contrast, Tymoshenko has a less flip-flopping past and her only odious past was when she was elected to parliament within Pavlo Lazarenko's Hromada (Community) party in 1998. Tymoshenko political position has remained unchanged since she joined opposition politics in 2000. Tymoshenko is not on the Melnychenko tapes.

The most bizarre aspect of the 2014 Ukrainian elections is therefore Poroshenko's high level of support and Tymoshenko's high negative ratings. Neither are angels or new faces; nevertheless, excuses for Poroshenko's flip-flopping past and ties to the notorious corrupt gas lobby are as equally strange as the venom against and lack of sympathy for Tymoshenko who spent over two years in jail on trumped-up charges.

Poroshenko is not the European politician some Ukrainian voters mistakenly believe, not only because he has called upon Tymoshenko to withdraw her candidacy but also because he is not a fan of transparency in his personal life and politics and business.

Transparency about his past flip-flopping is viewed by him and his election team as "black PR." Meanwhile, his ties to the odious Dmytro Firtash and the gas lobby, who pressured Klitschko to withdraw from the election, are a signal that he is disinterested in fighting corruption and changing the Byzantine nature of Ukraine's energy sector. Indeed, how more bizarre can it be that Poroshenko believed it to be a sound strategic election policy to fly to Vienna to receive Firtash's endorsement during the same week the US Department of Justice outlined criminal charges against him and other co-conspirators. The charges could land Firtash, who is out on bail in Vienna, decades in US prison.

In mid-June Ukrainian voters will have elected either Poroshenko or Tymoshenko as president in a campaign that has not produced the new faces the Euromaidan sought. Both candidates should agree before the election is over to work together to jointly deal with Ukraine's myriad crises. New faces may yet enter Ukrainian politics but only in the Kyiv city and pre-term parliamentary elections.

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