

The Jamestown Foundation

Friday, October 22 -- Volume 1, Issue 111

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR

FRONT RUNNERS BATTLE IT OUT IN UKRAINE'S LAST PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

--Taras Kuzio

Ukrainian media have published the last opinion polls allowed by prior to election day (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 15 and 18). Although the results vary among different polling organizations, some show Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich and opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko neck-and-neck. Four factors explain Yanukovich's popularity surge in the last month of the campaign.

First, the mysterious poisoning of Yushchenko took him out of the race for three weeks during the crucial last two months of the elections. Yushchenko twice visited a clinic in Vienna for treatments. Pro-presidential media outlets took advantage of his absences, alleging that Yushchenko had not been poisoned but is actually too unhealthy to be president. Pro-presidential parliamentary factions took the issue one step further by proposing changes to the election law that would require candidates to prove their physical fitness.

Second, the Yanukovich government has again raised pensions, student stipends, and wages, which correspondingly increased his support among pensioners. Democratic Initiatives sociologist Iryna Bekeshkina calculated that this additional boost from pensioners was 6.8% (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 15). Voters who have received an increase of at least 70 *hryvnia* (\$35) will back Yanukovich, she believes.

Third, under the influence of Russian political advisors working with the Yanukovich camp, and in a repeat of then-opposition candidate Leonid Kuchma's strategy in the 1994 presidential elections, new programmatic statements have added an additional 3% margin (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 15). These policy additions include granting Russian the status of a state (or official) language and dual

citizenship.

Fourth, Yanukovych has come out against NATO membership and for a return to an ill defined "non-bloc status." Articles seeking NATO and EU membership were removed from Ukraine's new military doctrine in July. Two months later, pro-NATO Defense Minister Yevhen Marchuk was sacked.

Both candidates now have very different constituencies. Yanukovych's new supporters are communist pensioners, while younger and more educated voters tend to back Yushchenko. Support for Communist leader and candidate Petro Symonenko has plummeted from its regular 20% level to only 5%. This means that nearly half of Yanukovych's voters are Communists.

However, Socialist voters have tended to stay loyal to their candidate, Oleksandr Moroz. In a run-off, three-quarters of Moroz's supporters are likely to transfer their allegiance to Yushchenko, as Moroz has repeatedly ruled out supporting Yanukovych (*Zerkalo nedeli*, October 9-15). This will give Yushchenko an additional 5-10% support in round two of the elections on November 21, particularly in Central Ukraine, the region that will likely decide the outcome of the elections.

In contrast, Yanukovych has reached what many Ukrainian pollsters believe is the limit of his support, which draws on traditional Communist voters, his native Donbas region, state officials, and pro-presidential party members. Serhiy Tyhipko, the head of Yanukovych's campaign, had always argued that Yanukovych would win the second round because left-wing voters would defect to him. But this scenario is now unlikely. Kuchma won in the second round of the 1994 elections with Communist support. But in this year's race, Yanukovych can already count on three-quarters of Communist supporters in the first round and thus will have fewer left-wing voters to draw upon in round two.

In mid-September, when Yushchenko was absent from the campaign, the Razumkov Center gave Yushchenko and Yanukovych 34% and 28.9% support, respectively, among those who planned to vote (*Ukrayinska pravda*, September 18). The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) found similar results.

A poll at the end of that month by Democratic Initiatives-Social Monitoring (DI-SM) gave Yushchenko a bigger lead of 8.5% (*Ukrayinska pravda*, September 29). One week later, a DI-SM poll

narrowed the gap between the two leading candidates to only 4.9% and 5.4% percent in Yushchenko's favor in rounds one and two (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 6). Clearly, the four factors described above had begun to influence voters' preferences.

Then, opinion polls by the Russian Obshchestvennoe Mnenie fund, linked to Russian political consultant Gleb Pavlovsky, claimed that Yushchenko's and Yanukovych's ratings were equal, a claim endorsed by presidential adviser Mikhail Pogrebynsky's Center for Political and Conflict Studies (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 5). This claim was met with disbelief. Kyiv Mohyla Academy political scientist Rostyslav Pawlenko argued that the Yanukovych camp were living in "fantasy land," and that the gap between both candidates remained in the region of 8% (*Ukrayinska pravda*, September 29).

Nevertheless, Pavlovsky persisted, claiming that his polls showed that Yanukovych was actually now in the lead with 36%, a 5% lead over Yushchenko (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 6). Another poll by Pavlovsky reduced this to Yanukovych leading by 3.4%. Pavlovsky's and Pogrebynsky's figures were at odds with the government's own All-Ukrainian Sociological Service, which still gave Yushchenko a 5.7% lead.

By mid-October, DI-SM and the Social Monitoring Center reported that Yanukovych had pulled even with Yushchenko, primarily by attracting Communist voters (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 14 and 15). The only exception to these findings were those of the Institute of Social and Political Psychology, Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, whose results continued to show a 10% and 7% lead for Yushchenko in rounds one and two, respectively (*Ukrayinska pravda*, October 7 and 14). Of those who planned to vote in the elections, 38.9% would vote for Yushchenko and 29.2% for Yanukovych, rising to 47.1% and 39.7%, respectively, in rounds two.

On the basis of these results, the Institute of Social and Political Psychology predicted that the final result would be 52.1% for Yushchenko and 47.9% for Yanukovych. If these predictions turn out to be correct, the final tally will resemble Kuchma's 6% margin of victory over then-incumbent Leonid Kravchuk in the 1994 elections. Besides gaining from Socialist voters in round two, Yushchenko will also gain 3.5% from those voters who are unwilling to reveal their preferences to pollsters as well as perhaps another 10% from "hidden voters."

According to KIIS sociologist Valerii Khmelko, Yushchenko's ratings were rising in September, which may have led to the authorities taking drastic action against him. By early October Yanukovich had moved ahead. But after Yushchenko returned to the campaign trail on October 10, the momentum began to swing back in his favor (*Den*, October 15).