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YUSHCHENKO CONTINUES TO LEAD IN UKRAINIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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Opinion polls are again at the center of Ukraine's 2004 presidential elections. The gap between Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich continues to remain stable at 5-8% (Ukrayinska pravda, September 9). Throughout the year Yushchenko's ratings have increased from 21 to 30% and Yanukovich's from 9 to 27%.

If the election goes into a second round, Yushchenko would obtain 40.2 and Yanukovich 33.2%, according to a new Democratic Initiatives-Sotsis (DI-Sotsis) poll (Ukrayinska pravda, September 7). This lead would not necessarily ensure outright victory for Yushchenko, as it is commonly thought that state "administrative resources" could add up to 10% to Yanukovich's final tally.

Polls cited by Yushchenko's Our Ukraine bloc give a wider lead for Yushchenko of 35-41% in both rounds versus 23-29% for Yanukovich (razom.org.ua, August 18). Yushchenko's election team believes that his true level of support is higher than polls suggest because, "Some today are afraid of saying that they are for Yushchenko, while others are embarrassed to say they are for Yanukovich" (Ukrayinska pravda, September 9). Opinion polls are often conducted by telephone, but many voters are suspicious as to who is actually asking the question. Voters who work in the state sector have been warned not to vote for Yushchenko if they want to keep their jobs.

One factor working in Yushchenko's favor is his status as an underdog. When asked which candidate had been given the best campaigning conditions, 64.3% said Yanukovich and only 4.9% for Yushchenko, according to the DI-Sotsis poll. This imbalance reflects the fact that only 12.5% of Ukrainians actually believe the elections will be held in a free and fair manner.

Acrimony over opinion polls has rested upon whether the gap predicted for a run-off between Yushchenko and Yanukovich is growing or narrowing. The Razumkov Center found that the gap had slightly increased from 7.4 to 7.7% between June and July (Ukrayinska pravda, August 3). The gap recorded by DI-Sotsis was higher at 9.3%, while the Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology reported a 12% gap in round two (Channel Five Television, August 10).

These positive results gave grounds for the opposition to celebrate what they believed was growing support for Yushchenko. The opposition newspaper Ukrayina moloda (July 26) reported that

Yushchenko's popularity in the second round was now growing five times faster than Prime Minister Yanukovich's.

With that trend, it is understandable that the Kyiv International Institute for Sociology (KIIS) was sharply criticized for reporting that the second-round gap between Yushchenko and Yanukovich had actually dropped (Ukrayinska pravda, August 2). KIIS found that Yushchenko and Yanukovich would receive 29.9 and 25.2% respectively in round one. For round two, the gap between Yushchenko and Yanukovich had fallen to only 2.8%, with the candidates receiving 39.3% and 36.5% respectively.

Predictably, the Yushchenko and the Yanukovich camps are citing only those polls that are favorable to their candidate. The pro-Yanukovich media used the KIIS data to argue that Yanukovich now has only to increase his support by 4% to win the elections (temnik.com.ua, August 13).

KIIS sociologist Valery Khmelko believes that there are two explanations for the apparently narrowing gap between the two leading candidates. First, during the summer the government radically increased student grants, pensions, and wages in what was widely seen as a populist government move to buy voters. Half of Prime Minister Yanukovich's supporters have rallied to him in the last two months, some because of these populist socioeconomic steps and 35% because: "He has a big chance of victory" (Ukrayinska pravda, September 1). Many voters, even among Yushchenko's supporters, do not believe that the authorities will voluntarily give up power, no matter how Ukrainians vote. Second, summer time polls do not necessarily give an accurate picture, as many people are away on holiday or at their dacha. This group of people, including many educated and independent businessmen, are more likely to vote for Yushchenko, Khmelko believes. Polls in September, after the school year began, therefore show a return to a larger gap between Yushchenko and Yanukovich in round two (Ukrayinska pravda, September 13).

A large group of swing voters remains: 30% of voters are undecided, set on voting against both Yushchenko and Yanukovich, or unwilling to vote. While only 17% of Ukrainophone voters are undecided or set on voting against both candidates, 28% of Russophones are uncommitted (Zerkalo nedeli, July 24-30).

This imbalance exists because some Communist Party voters do not like either Yushchenko or Yanukovich and they are unwilling to vote negatively for Yanukovich against Yushchenko in round two. Dislike for the authorities is far higher than in 1994, when the Communists voted

wholeheartedly for challenger Leonid Kuchma against incumbent Leonid Kravchuk in the run-off. This year, Communist candidate and party leader Petro Symonenko cannot openly call for support for Yanukovych in round two, for fear that it would damage his party's chances in the March 2006 parliamentary elections.

Unlike the 1994 scenario, Prime Minister Yushchenko is likely to gain far more of the undecided voters than is the challenger, Yanukovych (24% as opposed to only 10%). This means that the second round gap between both candidates could favor Yushchenko to a greater degree than polls currently show.