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UKRAINE: PROSPECTS FOR THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

By Taras Kuzio

The crucial event in Ukraine's political evolution will be the presidential election scheduled for October 2004. A study of previous elections from the past decade reveals some underlying patterns in Ukraine's electoral politics that will likely shape the outcome of this pivotal vote.

Despite his high popularity ratings, a victory for the national-liberal leader Viktor Yushchenko in 2004 is not a certainty. His best chance for winning is to enter a second round facing Piotr Symonenko, the leader of the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU). For this to happen the opposition would do better to submit separate candidates in the first round of the race, especially as Yushchenko's Our Ukraine and the KPU will never agree on a single candidate to challenge the nominee of the "party of power."

The current incumbent, Leonid Kuchma, is barred from running for a third term, and his centrist backers do not have a candidate with any public following. The Kuchmagate crisis destroyed the legitimacy of the oligarch ruling class, which makes it difficult for them to organize a Russian style succession. Hence 2004 will see an open and fiercely contested race.

1991 AND 1994: NATIONAL DEMOCRATS MARGINALIZED

Ukraine's first presidential elections in December 1991 were an anomaly, as they did not go through to the second round, an occurrence not likely to be repeated in 2004. In 1991

Rada speaker Leonid Kravchuk won with a high majority of 62 percent. Three national democrats won a total of 29 percent while two liberals scored a combined 4.68 percent.

The national democrats did not have candidates in the 1994 presidential elections, unless one counts Petro Talanchuk (0.5 percent) and Rada speaker Ivan Pliushch (1.3 percent), a well-known sympathizer of the liberal Yushchenko. The liberal economist Volodymyr Lanovyi (9.3 percent) and independent businessman Valeriy Babych (2.4 percent) were non-"party of power" centrists. With 13 percent of the vote, Socialist Party (SPU) leader Oleksandr Moroz obtained the best result of any candidate, other than those from the "party of power."

The main competition in the June-July 1994 race was between former Prime Minister Leonid Kuchma and the incumbent, Kravchuk. The incumbent led in the first round by 37.7 percent to Kuchma's 31.3 percent. But Kuchma edged him out in the second round by 52.1 percent to 45.1 percent.

Kuchma's victory was hardly a landslide when one considers that he had the backing of Russia (diplomatically, financially, and through the media), and that Kravchuk was betrayed by many of his colleagues in the "party of power." Still, Kravchuk's play on defense of statehood and patriotism won him nearly half of the votes and clear majorities in Western and Central Ukraine (including Kyiv).

1999 ELECTIONS: UKRAINE COPIES RUSSIA

In the October-November 1999 presidential elections the national democrats were again under-represented. The leaders of the two wings of Rukh together obtained a paltry 3.4 percent of the vote, although some national democratic votes did go to former Security Service Chairman Yevhen Marchuk, who obtained 8.1 percent.

Marchuk's pre-election anti-corruption and anti-Kuchma rhetoric was very reminiscent of that which has been deployed by Yulia Tymoshenko since 2000. Many of Tymoshenko's active supporters are former Marchuk allies (for example, long-term former political

prisoner Levko Lukianenko). Marchuk sold out his voters when he agreed to become secretary of the National Security and Defense Council (NRBO) just prior to the second round of elections. This directly copied the way Boris Yeltsin coopted rival Aleksandr Lebed in the 1996 Russian elections by appointing him secretary of the Russian Security Council. Since then the NRBO and Marchuk have become marginalized.

With 11.3 percent of the vote, Moroz obtained a result similar to his 1994 performance (13 percent). Moroz's popularity as a politician is greater than that of his party, the SPU. The same is true for Yushchenko, who has higher ratings than his party, Our Ukraine. In Ukraine personalities are more important than party politics, a factor affirmed in the 2002 elections when blocs named themselves after their leaders.

The For the Truth, For the People, For Ukraine! (SPU-Peasant Party) bloc in the 1998 Rada elections obtained 8.6 percent of the vote, up from the 6.9 per cent obtained by the SPU in 2002. Both totals are still far less than the votes received by Moroz in the first rounds of the 1994 (13 percent) and 1999 (11.3 percent) presidential elections.

The two main candidates in the 1999 elections were incumbent Kuchma and KPU leader Piotr Symonenko, who obtained 36.5 and 22.2 percent of the votes, respectively. Besides Symonenko and Moroz, the third left-wing candidate was Natalia Vitrenko, leader of the Progressive Socialists (PSP), an offshoot of the SPU. The PSP, which obtained 11 percent, plays a fake opposition role in Ukrainian politics similar to that played by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.

Kuchma had always wanted to repeat Yeltsin's 1996 victory over Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov by facing Symonenko in the second round. Kuchma won by a comfortable 56.3 to Symonenko's 37.8 percent, which was less than the combined left vote of 44.5 percent in the first round. Kuchma would have possibly lost if he had faced Moroz, as there would have been less negative voting.

THE INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

There are two certainties in Ukrainian presidential elections. First, the incumbent will get to the second round. His access to "administrative resources" and the advantages of office makes this a certainty. Second, a run-off is inevitable, since no candidate will score more than 50 percent in the first round. In the 1991 election, Kravchuk, the ideology secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) until August 1991 and Rada speaker from 1990, was the de facto incumbent.

In 2004 there will be no incumbent candidate, as Kuchma cannot stand for a third term. The position of Rada speaker is not a good springboard to victory in the elections (as seen by Pliushch in 1994 and Oleksandr Tkachenko, Rada speaker in 1999, who dropped out before the elections after finding little support). This suggests that current Rada speaker and former head of the presidential administration Volodymyr Lytvyn has little chance of success if he decides to become a presidential candidate in 2004. The same is probably true for the current presidential chief of staff Viktor Medvedchuk, who does harbor presidential ambitions.

As we have seen in Russia with Vladimir Putin, the best springboard to victory in the presidential elections is the position of prime minister. The government of Viktor Yanukovich came to power in November and has eighteen months grace before the Rada can initiate a vote of no confidence. Yanukovich's government will therefore remain in place, at a minimum, until July 2004—that is, up to the summer recess on the eve of the 2004 elections.

A SINGLE OPPOSITION CANDIDATE?

During his February visit to the United States, Yushchenko called for the "consolidation" of forces opposed to oligarchic clans and authoritarianism. But is opposition unity possible and, if so, is it likely to succeed? Secret Ministry of Interior documents dated November and leaked to *Ukrainska Pravda* in February supported a single opposition candidate in the 2004 elections, which implies that Yanukovich does not see it as a threat.

Ukraine's opposition is not united. A major divide exists between Our Ukraine and the radical three--the SPU, KPU and Tymoshenko. Our Ukraine is unsure whether or not it is part of the opposition. In February 2001 Prime Minister Yushchenko offered Kuchma immunity from prosecution, a step opposed by the radical opposition.

As with Rukh since 1992, Our Ukraine is divided into moderate derzhavnyky (statists), willing to compromise with the authorities, and anti-oligarch radicals closer to Tymoshenko. Yushchenko himself is a moderate, more at home negotiating compromises than leading demonstrators. Our Ukraine has also ruled out working with the KPU. The inability of the KPU to come to terms with the artificial famine of 1933, as seen by Symonenko's refusal at the February Rada hearings to accept it as a crime directed against Ukrainians, means that the gulf between national democrats and the KPU will remain wide.

The KPU refused to support the anti-Kuchma protests that grew out of the Kuchmagate crisis of November 2000. The KPU supported pro-presidential oligarchs in removing the Yushchenko government in April 2001. Another drawback for the opposition is that the KPU and Tymoshenko have high negative ratings, countering their relatively high positive ratings. The KPU's high negative ratings stem from its inability to disassociate itself from the Soviet past. Tymoshenko's come from her oligarchic links to Pavlo Lazarenko, arguably one of Ukraine's most corrupt prime ministers.

2004 ELECTION SCENARIOS: YUSHCHENKO VERSUS COMMUNIST OR CENTRIST

The only two factors that are certain in the second round of the 2004 elections are that there will be no incumbent and that Yushchenko will be there. Yushchenko's popularity has remained steady at 25-30 percent since he became prime minister in December 1999. And as a presidential candidate, Yushchenko has no competition in Western and Central Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the core one-third national democratic vote (29.5 percent in the 1991 presidential elections and 30.8 percent in the March 2002 Rada elections) is enough to

secure passage to the second round but insufficient to guarantee victory. Yushchenko will get Tymoshenko's votes, but to win in the second round he will need to woo votes from the SPU and some centrists.

In appealing to non-national democratic voters, Yushchenko has two choices. Either he seeks votes from those close to him (Democratic Initiatives, Agrarians and People's Democratic Rada factions). Or, he adopts Tymoshenko's populist, anti-oligarch and anti-corruption rhetoric in Eastern Ukraine. The first option would neutralize some oligarch opposition and provide access to "administrative resources." The second would antagonize the oligarchs but might overcome the Eastern Ukrainian distrust for his national democratic allies.

Yushchenko will face either KPU leader Symonenko or a pro-Kuchma centrist in the second round. Prime Minister Yanukovich could be the centrist. Yanukovich's advantage is that he can draw upon support from Donetsk, where he was governor from 1997-2002 and allied to Ukraine's wealthiest oligarch, Renat Akhmetov. In the 2002 elections, the pro-Kuchma For a United Ukraine (ZYU) bloc came in first only in Donetsk oblast, where it garnered 36.8 percent of the vote. Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, together with the city of Sevastopol, are the only three regions where Our Ukraine failed to cross the 4 percent threshold.

Yanukovich would be backed by Russia, and he could draw also on the one fifth of Ukraine's population in the Donbas to ensure that he enters the second round. If Yushchenko faces Yanukovich in the second round he could lose. The KPU would see the oligarchs as the lesser of two evils and probably back Yanukovich, as in 2001 when it joined forces with pro-Kuchma centrists to remove the Yushchenko government. Factors working in Yushchenko's favor are that not all centrists would back a man from Donbas as Ukraine's President, and that Medvedchuk's Social Democratic United Party (SDPUo) is a serious business rival to the Donbas clan.

Yushchenko's best chance for victory would be to enter the second round facing Symonenko in a repeat of the 1999 elections. In opinion polls since 2000 Symonenko has always come in second to Yushchenko. If the second round were a contest between Yushchenko and Symonenko, pro-Kuchma centrists would back Yushchenko, fearing a Communist victory even more than Yushchenko's reforms.

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