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**POLL NUMBERS SHOW YANUKOVYCH CLOSING THE GAP**

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A debate has raged in Ukraine this month over the authenticity of poll numbers for Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Kuchma candidate in this year's October election. Pro-opposition activists have questioned how Yanukovich's ratings could have grown so suddenly and nearly reached those of the main opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko.

The debate has centered primarily on how it has come to pass that Yanukovich, who entered the race only in mid-April, has managed to catch up so quickly to Yushchenko. There have been three polls conducted since Yanukovich entered the race, each assuming that Yushchenko would face Yanukovich in the second round of this year's elections. The results, all favoring Yushchenko but showing Yanukovich with strong support, were 32:23 (Razumov Center), 37:33 (Democratic Initiatives/Sotsis), and 33:30 percent (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology).

A May opinion poll by the National Institute of Strategic Studies, a presidential think tank, confirmed this trend. More Ukrainians believe Yanukovich will be Ukraine's next president (26 percent) than do those who think Yushchenko will win the election (20 percent). In past elections the votes of the undecided, or of those given in round one to unpopular candidates, tend to go to the candidate who is seen as the likely victor.

Yushchenko has had relatively stable ratings of 23-30 percent since his government was removed in April of 2001 in a joint vote of no confidence by pro-Kuchma centrists and the Communist Party. This high and stable rating gave the opposition a false sense of security because of the low popularity figures that have attached to President Leonid Kuchma and his allies, all of whom suffered political damage from the Kuchmagate crisis.

But Yushchenko's own popularity failed to rise after his Our Ukraine bloc came in first, with 23 percent, in the proportional half of the 2002 parliamentary elections. And Yushchenko's popularity has eroded dangerously since last year, from 23 to 21 percent.

Unlike the authorities, who are fielding a single candidate (Yanukovich), the opposition will be divided between two candidates, Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko and Yushchenko. The Communists hate Yushchenko and the "Nashists" (a play on "Nasha Ukrayina," resembling "Nazis")

more than they despise Kuchma. Prior to April those in the pro-Kuchma camp had no candidate because they focused their energy on adopting constitutional changes. The second most popular candidate in polls was therefore Symonenko.

This changed after the failure to adopt constitutional changes on April 8. Five days later Yanukovych was promoted as the Kuchma camp's candidate. Yanukovych and his Party of Regions "party of power" from the Donbas were in fact not overly displeased at the failure of the constitutional reforms. After all, the failure meant that if their candidate emerges victorious, he will now inherit all of Kuchma's powers.

The recent growth in Yanukovych's ratings should be seen against the background of the 8-11 percent ratings he garnered personally before he was declared to be the pro-Kuchma candidate. That is to say, the higher ratings of 23-33 percent apply to Yanukovych as the consolidated candidate of the authorities in round two of an election vote.

Most polls, such as those by the reputable Razumkov Center, give Yushchenko up to a ten percent lead in round two. This is, in and of itself, a good launching pad for the elections. But it is insufficient to guarantee a victory.

Yanukovych's access to "administrative resources" - that is, the levers of power wielded by the state - could overcome the narrow gap that separates him from Yushchenko. Yanukovych also has greater access to television and the financial resources of Ukraine's wealthiest oligarchic clan, which is based in the Donbas.

An important factor that is likely to influence the elections is the huge public distrust that exists toward the authorities. Low levels of trust can be expected to lead to a high level of negative voting in round two, as occurred in the 1999 elections. Polls in Ukraine consistently show that, among the country's well known politicians and this year's candidates, Yushchenko has the lowest number of voters who say they will never vote for him.

At the same time, various polls have found that 60-70 percent of Ukrainians do not believe that the election this year will be free and fair. Many Ukrainians believe that Yushchenko will obtain the highest number of votes, but that Yanukovych will still be declared the victor by the Central Election Committee.

As Our Ukraine deputy Mykola Tomenko explained, falsification of the election results can be

expected to work in Yanukovich's favor. This is because "After the events in Mukachevo [see EDM, May 6] people say that the authorities will decide who will be victorious" (Zerkalo Nedeli, March 13-18; Ukrayinska Pravda, April 16, 25, 28, 29, May 5; [www.temnik.com.ua](http://www.temnik.com.ua), April 27).