

GENDER ISSUES IN ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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In the late Soviet era, fixed quotas ensured that one-half of seats in local councils and a third of the seats in Ukraine's Supreme Soviet were allocated to women of the Ukrainian SSR. In Ukraine's three parliaments elected in 1990, 1994, and 1998, women's representation initially declined and then slightly increased from 2.9 to 4.6 to its current 8 percent, but it still lags far behind that of the Soviet era. Nevertheless, women's issues continue to remain marginal to the concerns of mainstream politicians in Ukraine.

In the March 1998 parliamentary elections, only one party — the All-Ukrainian Party Women's Initiative (VPZhI) — campaigned on a gender platform. Its result of 0.58 percent of the vote placed it 22nd on the list of 30 blocs and parties competing in that ballot.

In contrast, Women for the Future (ZhzM), one of two election groups in the current election campaign with a gender platform, has scored far more impressive results in opinion polls, which have averaged between 6-7 percent. These figures ensure that the group will easily pass the 4 percent voting barrier to qualify for the distribution of 225 seats contested under a proportional system. According to a January poll by the Ukrainian Institute for Social Studies, 10 percent of women and 2 percent of men will vote for Women for the Future.

Within Ukraine's 130 registered political parties, five are devoted to women's issues. The VPZhI, registered in October 1997, is the oldest of these. It is also the only party based outside Kyiv, in Kharkiv. Three others are also small parties — the Women's Party of Ukraine (registered in March 1997), the Women's People Party United (September 1998), and the Solidarity with Women Party (December 1999).

Women for the Future's rise to third place in popularity among the 35 election blocs and parties has been meteoric. Its registration on 30 March of last year was suspiciously only a day before the deadline for parties to be registered to ensure they could compete in the 31 March parliamentary elections. Within less than a year, Women for the Future has managed to allegedly attract 320,000 members within 500 branches, an impressive figure when compared to the Communist Party's 140,000 members.

Women for the Future is led by individuals with ties to the former Soviet Ukrainian nomenklatura and to Leonid Kuchma when he was prime minister in 1992-93. According to Professor Alexandra Hrycak, a Western expert on gender in Ukraine, the ideology of Women for the

Future is Soviet and not in tune with gender issues and the women's rights movement in the West. Women for the Future does not oppose the Soviet-era stereotype of women's role in politics being confined to areas such as maternal and child-welfare issues.

Valentyna Dovzhenko, the head of Women for the Future, also heads the All-Ukrainian Voluntary Fund of Hope and Good (VDFND). She is also the former head of the now-defunct Ministry of Family and Youth Affairs, which was established in 1997. She is currently the head of the parliamentary Committee on Family and Youth. The head of the controlling committee of VDFND and the president of another NGO, the National Fund for the Social Defense of Mothers and Children, is Lyudmyla Kuchma. The VDFND was established by the Soviet-era Union of Ukrainian Women led by Maria Orlyk, a leading member of Women for the Future.

The answer to the question of why the Women for the Future party has managed to become so popular so quickly is access to "administrative resources." "Administrative resources" or closeness to centers of power, such as the executive, ensure high popularity and victory in Ukraine's elections. Independent and thereby genuine women's parties, such as the four women's parties other than the ZhzhM, stand little chance in elections when Women for the Future has executive support and -- more importantly -- the backing of the country's first lady, Lyudmyla Kuchma. The only other registered gender party for the elections, the Women's Party of Ukraine, has no access to these resources and has been unable to attract any popularity.

Women for the Future was created especially to ensure that another pro-presidential faction would exist in the next parliament. It will therefore play the same role as the Greens in the 1998 elections, who were able to win 5.43 percent of the vote by targeting floating voters, the undecided, and those disillusioned with party politics. In this sense, Women for the Future campaigns on a platform of hostility to the very idea of the worthiness of party politics. The platform of Women for the Future and its traditional campaigning style appeals to women aged between 30-40 and centers on such issues as women's rights, health (e.g. breast cancer), and domestic violence. Women for the Future's closeness to Ukraine's first lady has also drawn comparisons to the Yugoslavian United Party of the Left led by Slobodan Milosevic's wife, Mira Markovich.

Women for the Future has been defined as an "albino" by the weekly "Zerkalo Nedeli/Dzerkalo Tyzhnya" because it is devoid of any ideological platform. The party's popularity has not grown because of advertising or rousing speeches in defense of women's rights. On the contrary, its members have instead traveled around Ukraine distributing material assistance at schools, military bases, and factories. In Sumy and Kharkiv oblasts, foodstuffs have been distributed free of charge. In all rayons in Chernivtsi Oblast, "Photos for Mother" actions were undertaken in each school, kindergarten, library, and cultural clubs -- free photos were made of children standing next to Women for the Future party symbols. Afterward, presents were distributed free of charge to poor and needy families. Dovzhenko has denied that this is tantamount to drawing on "administrative resources" or that there was anything immoral in

doing this.

According to the Committee of Voters of Ukraine, a third of the distribution of free assistance by election blocs in Ukraine is undertaken by Women for the Future. Grandiose concerts by Ukrainian and Russian pop stars in towns and villages throughout Ukraine organized by the party cost some \$100,000, according to "Zerkalo Nedeli/Dzerkalo Tyzhnya." Yet, the party is vague about the sources of the funds to finance the high cost of running such a brash campaign by Ukraine's newest women's party.

Women for the Future is likely to enter the next Ukrainian parliament. But, this is not likely to advance women's rights, in the sense understood by women's movements in the West, because of the Soviet ideological influence on the party. Instead, Ukraine will obtain another pro-presidential faction in parliament that differs little from other oligarchic factions led by the opposite gender.

Postscript:

The authorities would only like one (party of power) women's party to be allowed in the elections. The Central Election Commission annulled its previous decision to register the Women of Ukraine (Zhinky Ukrayiny) party. The commission's decision followed a ruling by a Kyiv court that the resolutions of the party's congress that proposed party-list candidates for the election were illegal. In addition, the court said the party has not paid an election security deposit of some \$48,000. This followed the refusal to register Larysa Skoryk's Women for the Future of Children party which will now enter the elections as the All Ukrainian Party of Inter-Ethnic Understanding.