

END NOTE

STRONG AND WEAK 'PARTIES OF POWER' IN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

By Taras Kuzio

In mid-1999 the Russian authorities were concerned that Our Home is Russia (NDR) only had a popularity rating of several percent and thus set about creating a completely new "party of power" -- the Interregional Movement of Yedinstvo (Unity). In the Russian parliamentary elections on 19 December 1999, Yedinstvo captured 23.3 percent of the vote and 82 seats, only 1 percent and eight seats fewer than the Communist Party (KPRF).

The Ukrainian "party of power" -- For a United Ukraine (ZYU) election bloc -- was also created four months prior to the March 31, 2002 parliamentary elections. President Leonid Kuchma ordered all state officials from the raion level upward to ensure that ZYU obtain 30 percent in the elections. In sharp contrast to its Russian equivalent, ZYU has only received an average of 4 percent popularity ratings in most opinion polls. Its main base of support is the Donbas, the same as that of the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU), while it is unpopular in western and central Ukraine, including Kyiv.

Why did Unity do well in Russia in 1999, while Ukraine's ZYU appears to be faring badly today?

Unity was created as a completely new political formation backed by then-acting President Vladimir Putin as his vehicle to help him secure an election win in March 2000. Yedinstvo was a completely new political formation, whereas ZYU is a union of five regionally based mini "parties of power," some of which had to be cajoled into supporting ZYU. Both Unity and ZYU aim to create pro-presidential majorities in the newly elected parliaments. ZYU aims to implement Kuchma's long-term goal of changing Ukraine into a Russian-style presidential republic by implementing the results of the flawed April 2000 referendum.

Unity carefully chose leaders such as then-acting Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu, who was constantly on television due to his ministry's involvement in the Chechen conflict, and Aleksandr Karelin, a Greco-Roman wrestler of international fame. The two Unity leaders both stressed their abilities to act decisively. Putin, who endorsed Unity, was also seen in a similar light. In contrast, ZYU's leader is the uncharismatic head of the presidential administration, Volodymyr Lytvyn, who is not a confident public speaker and is seen as an academic rather than a "man of action." While Yedinstvo's image helped it attract young voters, ZYU struggles to do so.

Another difference between Unity and ZYU is the high

popularity of Putin and the low popularity of Kuchma. Some 43.5 percent of Ukrainians have a negative impression of Kuchma, according to a February poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. Kuchma has attempted to revive ZYU's fortunes by issuing a presidential decree on 28 January ordering 300,000 state officials to back ZYU, and by proposing that he would be prepared to head the ZYU after it is transformed into a party. But while Kuchma's presidency will come to an end in two years' time, Putin was seen as an up-and-coming candidate to fill the political vacuum left by the retirement of President Boris Yeltsin. In addition, Putin never stated his intention to lead Unity.

According to Article 103 of the Ukrainian Constitution, the president cannot head any party, and Kuchma's suggestion that he would head ZYU flew in the face of the president's well-known negative attitude toward the role of parties. This trial balloon was therefore more a product of internal problems and panic in the presidential administration than of the low popularity of ZYU. This became clear after a January poll by the Center for Economic and Political Studies gave it only 3.9 percent, meaning it would not get through the 4 percent barrier in the half of seats elected proportionately. Lytvyn explained away these low ratings for ZYU by saying that "sociology, just like academia, prostitutes itself (in Ukraine)."

Another major difference between the situations of Russia in 1999 and Ukraine today is that in Ukraine there is a strong alternative to the "party of power." Our Ukraine occupies the same space on the political spectrum as both Russia's liberal Yabloko and the Union of Rightist Forces (SPS) -- which includes Russia's Choice, the country's first "party of power." Our Ukraine is also different because it can be more clearly understood as "Rukh-2" with an economic platform and a charismatic and popular leader, Viktor Yushchenko.

The combination of national and democratic ideologies within one program was peculiar to the non-Russian republics of the former USSR, but not to Russia. The Winter Crop Generation bloc, a Ukrainian attempt to emulate the SPS funded by oligarch and Kuchma's son-in-law Viktor Pinchuk, has failed to attract popularity. Pure reformist blocs (in contrast to those combining national and democratic agendas, such as Our Ukraine) have little public support.

Unity and ZYU both had/have unrivalled access to "administrative resources," privileged access to the media, and the support of regional state administrations controlled by the executive. Both aim to transform their election blocs into political parties after the elections, and both had vague "centrist" programs that emphasized "stability" and stood for a corporatist status quo.

This similarity in ideology ends there. Appealing to Russia as a "great power," Unity lamented the demise of the Soviet Union, something ZYU or any Ukrainian oligarch group would never do. The largest group of voters to switch to Yedintsvo was therefore from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), a party whose ideology links Russian nationalism and Marxism. The KPU is hostile to Ukrainian independence and any defectors would go to other left-wing parties, not to ZYU. Yedintsvo manipulated Russian state and ethnic

nationalism at a time when Russia felt affronted by NATO's unilateral military action in Kosova and a new Chechen conflict had begun. It is impossible for ZYU to manipulate state nationalism in Ukraine.

ZYU therefore more closely resembles an earlier Russian "party of power" -- NDR -- rather than Russia's Choice, which preceded NDR, or Unity, which succeeded it. NDR received only 10.3 per cent in the 1995 elections. Polls commissioned by ZYU have also given it an inflated popularity of 10 percent, although its true popularity is only some 4 percent according to other polls. ZYU may obtain as much as NDR did in 1995 because of Kuchma's backing and election malpractice, but this would still be far less than the 30 percent that ZYU leaders optimistically predicted the bloc would obtain when it was formed.

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