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TYMOSHENKO MOST POPULAR POLITICAL FORCE IN UKRAINE

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Parliament's March 18 vote to call pre-term elections for Kyiv's city mayor was a second major victory for Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko this month, following the new gas contract with Russia signed on March 6. The vote is symbolically important because Ukraine's legislation requires that the president appoint the elected mayor to also be the city's governor (head of the city's State Administration). The Tymoshenko Bloc (BYuT) is by far the most popular force in Kyiv, and therefore its candidate will presumably win the snap election. Both victories will likely increase Tymoshenko's already high popularity and give BYuT control over the capital city ahead of the 2009 presidential elections.

Tymoshenko and BYuT have now enhanced their credentials as anti-corruption crusaders. Meanwhile, President Viktor Yushchenko and the Party of Regions have been harmed by their continued support for a gas intermediary company and the corrupt and unpopular Kyiv mayor. The normally cautious former Kyiv mayor Oleksandr Omelchenko and Kyiv city councilor and boxer Vitaly Klichko both suggested that the mayor had been under the protection of the presidential secretariat.

Yushchenko's already damaged reputation will take yet another hit, because his chief of staff, Viktor Baloha, has publicly supported Chernovetsky. This alliance has further widened the gulf between Yushchenko and Our Ukraine-People's Self Defense (NUNS), as the latter had refused to send representatives to the presidential commission established to investigate Chernovetsky following his fistfight with NUNS

leader and Interior Minister Yuriy Lutsenko on January 18 (see EDM, January 31).

The popularly held view is that the commission, controlled by Baloha, was set up merely to whitewash Chernovetsky. An alternative government commission, backed by BYuT and NUNS ministers, estimated that the cost of Chernovetsky's abuse of office was \$250 million, largely from land distribution deals.

Even before these two victories this month, Tymoshenko and BYuT had become the most popular politician and party in Ukraine. Her program to begin repaying lost Soviet-era savings only partially explains the growing popularity. Other factors include poor policies undertaken by the opposition, such as boycotting parliament – which has been very unpopular among Ukrainians. Tymoshenko is seen as a reformer and anti-corruption crusader obstructed from undertaking popular policies.

If presidential elections were held now, Tymoshenko would win by a large margin. A recent poll gave a more modest level of support for Tymoshenko (25%) over Regions leader Viktor Yanukovich's 23%, with Yushchenko badly trailing at 9%.

BYuT's ratings have grown for the first time since the elections and if elections were held now it would probably take 40% of the vote, giving it more than 200 parliamentary seats, up from its current 156. Unlike NUNS and Regions, BYuT did not fear early elections if the blockade of parliament had led to its dissolution.

This year is turning into a triumphant one for Tymoshenko and BYuT, especially with presidential elections only one year away. Tymoshenko and BYuT's support is growing throughout Ukraine, including in Regions' traditional eastern Ukrainian strongholds. Tymoshenko is catching up even faster to Yanukovich in southern Ukraine, also a potential swing region. Central Ukraine traditionally decides Ukraine's presidential elections, and the region is now dominated by Tymoshenko.

Both Regions and Yanukovich have experienced a slump in popularity since the 2007 elections, falling from 34% to 21%. If parliamentary elections were held now they would obtain far fewer seats than BYuT. Yanukovich's personal popularity also slumped, from 30% to 20%, while the number of Ukrainians who hold a negative view of his activities rose from 37% to 50%.

NUNS received 14% in both the 2006 and 2007 elections, a 10% drop on 2002 when Our Ukraine first ran in an election. Since the 2007 elections, NUNS's popularity has nearly halved to only 8%, due to the public airing of the bloc's internal divisions and its retreat from an election promise to merge the nine member parties in NUNS.

A catastrophic decline in Yushchenko's popularity has, according to a survey conducted by Ukrainian political consultant Volodymyr Fesenko, stabilized at only 10%. The president's popularity rating temporarily rose to 20% after he disbanded parliament on April 2, 2007, but has since halved. Yushchenko's poor showing is primarily due to his inability to implement the anti-corruption and rule of law pledges that mobilized the Orange Revolution more than three years ago.

As Fesenko convincingly argues, the president's future will be heavily dependent on his personal relationship with Tymoshenko. However, presidential strategy in this regard seems to be the opposite of what is needed, as it is undermining the president's ratings and also damaging the popularity of NUNS, whose honorary chairman is Yushchenko. It is no coincidence that the president and NUNS both have ratings in the 10% range.

Recent polls indicate that Ukrainian voters have proven to be far more sophisticated than Ukraine's elites have ever given them credit. As a young democracy, Ukraine's free media and open political competition and discourse provides sufficient information for Ukrainians to pass judgment on their leaders, whether in polls or elections.

(Ukrayinska pravda, March 6-14; Zerkalo nedeli, March 8)

