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UKRAINE'S 2007 ELECTIONS WILL ALSO DECIDE UKRAINE'S NEXT PRESIDENT

By Taras Kuzio

Ukraine's September 30 parliamentary elections will decide the country's next government and most likely determine the outcome of the presidential elections two years later. As seasoned Zerkalo nedeli commentator Serhiy Rakhmanin pointed out, the "pre-term parliamentary campaign gives [President Viktor] Yushchenko a great opportunity to launch the presidential campaign ahead of time."

The conflated election campaigns have led to electoral populism. Yushchenko and his Our Ukraine-Self Defense (NUNS) coalition have launched a campaign to remove parliamentary immunity, a campaign issue last raised by President Leonid Kuchma in an April 2000 referendum. The Party of Regions, which now dominates parliament, replied by calling for the end of immunity for all officials - president, prime minister, judges, and deputies.

These moves should discourage corrupt oligarchs and businessmen from running for parliament and help separate business and politics. But the anti-oligarch election rhetoric does not square with the continued presence of oligarchs in both the Party of Regions and NUNS. Yuriy Lutsenko's People's Self Defense, Our Ukraine's ally in the 2007 elections, was established by an oligarch, Davyd Zvannia. The Privat oligarchic group, allied to former senior Yushchenko adviser Oleksandr Tretyakov, has eight representatives in the NUNS list.

The leaders of Self-Defense claim to have reformed. Lutsenko admitted, "Yes. We are the only political force that publicly accepted its mistakes, including the choice of personnel, and cleaned out and renewed ourselves." The party removed businessman Petro Poroshenko, whose name is associated with the corruption charges that led to the September 2005 political crisis.

According to Zerkalo nedeli, the NUNS election list was heavily influenced by Lutsenko and Ihor Kolomoysky, the controversial head of Privat. Thus the changes look more like musical chairs than cleaning house.

NUNS needs to regroup after Our Ukraine's poor performance in the 2006 elections, when it obtained fewer seats than in 2002. The coalition also needs reinforcement to compete with the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc (BYuT), another veteran of the Orange Revolution. Finally, NUNS needs nation-wide support. Anti-oligarch and anti-corruption sentiment mobilized many western-central Ukrainians to participate in the Orange Revolution. These sentiments are not popular among voters in eastern Ukraine, who have had no qualms about voting for a convicted felon supported by oligarchs -- Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich.

Yanukovich's Party of Regions has always included corrupt and discredited former Kuchma officials and oligarchs, such as Renat Akhmetov, who has ignored calls by the president to not run for parliament. Akhmetov ranks seventh on the Party of Regions election list.

NUNS has unequivocally stated that its election and future coalition partner is the BYuT. Senior NUNS leaders have publicly refuted suggestions that they may enter a coalition with the Party of Regions. Lutsenko has stated that NUNS would only enter a grand coalition if BYuT also agreed. Yushchenko has been less clear in his intentions. Following the 2006 elections Yushchenko sent two close allies to separately negotiate with BYuT and the Party of Regions, a strategy that he may repeat this year.

The parliamentary coalition established after the 2007 elections will heavily influence the outcome of the 2009 elections. With the prime minister's position strengthened following constitutional reforms in 2006, the office is an even better launching pad for the presidency.

However, Yushchenko has proven unable to work with two of his three prime ministers, Yulia Tymoshenko and Yanukovich, because he sees both as potential competitors for the presidency. Ideally, Yushchenko would prefer that neither of them become Ukraine's next prime minister. The Party of Regions is leading the polls, so

the Orange camp is battling for second place. If NUNS places second, Yushchenko would likely choose a non-threatening technocrat, such as former prime minister Yuriy Yekhanurov, for the job.

If BYuT finishes second, as seems likely, Yushchenko could again be tempted to negotiate a grand coalition with the Party of Regions. His only condition would be that Yanukovych not be prime minister. Yushchenko has reportedly reached such an agreement through Yekhanurov, who has always been close to the Party of Regions, and presidential secretariat head Viktor Baloga.

This scenario poses three risks for Yushchenko.

First, forcing NUNS into a grand coalition with the Party of Regions might be more palatable than in 2006, as it would not include the Communists and Yanukovych would not be prime minister. However, it would split NUNS and prevent the planned post-election unification of its constituent members into a pro-presidential party and vehicle for Yushchenko's re-election in 2009.

Second, it would push BYuT into opposition, where it has always felt rather comfortable. Tymoshenko was the only one of four opposition leaders who did not stand in the 2004 elections. If Tymoshenko was in opposition in 2007–2009, during which time Yushchenko supported a grand coalition, the president could lose orange voters.

Third, the Party of Regions could renege on any agreement to stand aside in 2009, and members could submit their own presidential candidate. Alternatively, they might find it difficult to persuade their voters to back Yushchenko, after seven years of hostile propaganda against him.

Yushchenko is convinced that the 2007 elections are the key to his re-election in 2009. But not repeating the same strategic mistakes made against Tymoshenko and Yanukovych in 2005–2006 will also play an important part in deciding Ukraine's future.

(Zerkalo nedeli, August 11–17; Inter TV, August 6; Ukrayinska pravda, August 2, 13)

