



UKRAINE: Premier's party raises divisive issues

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EVENT: The Party of Regions announced on September 17 that it had collected three million signatures for a referendum on the Russian language, NATO and presidential powers.

SIGNIFICANCE: The three issues are highly divisive -- Ukrainians split regionally and politically on the language question and attitudes to NATO, while reform of Ukraine's constitution so that regional state administrations are elected and not appointed by the president raises the prospect of further institutional and constitutional conflict.

ANALYSIS: On September 7, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions began collecting signatures in support of a national referendum on the status of the Russian language, the election of district and regional administration heads, and Ukraine's non-affiliation with military blocs.

Russian language. Political parties and presidential candidates from eastern Ukraine have traditionally raised the divisive issue of raising the status of Russian to a second state language since the 1994 presidential election, to mobilise Russophone voters in the east and south. In power, they have ignored the issue because of two factors:

- Since the 1996 constitution designates Ukrainian as the country's sole state language, any change would require a two-thirds vote in parliament, which has been beyond any parliamentary coalition.
- Support for elevating the Russian language never exceeds one-third of voters. Although Ukrainians and Russians are equally divided in daily language use, upwards of 20% of those who use Russian claim Ukrainian as their 'native language', are bilingual and use both languages.

Bilingualism is typical of central Ukraine, which voted for President Viktor Yushchenko in 2004 and 'Orange' parties in 2006, and favours the liberal position of the 1989 language law and 1996 constitution, which make Ukrainian the state language with respect for local language diversity. Monophones -- Russian or Ukrainian -- tend to be based in the pro-Yanukovich east and the pro-Orange west respectively.

Recent elections. Yanukovich raised the language issue as presidential candidate in 2004, and his party has used it in 2006-07 to energise voters in the east and south against the threat from its Orange opponents. In 2005, Yevhen Kushnaryov, the former Regions ideologue (since deceased), played an important role in placing Russian at the centre of the party's programme and organising local councils in the east and south to vote for making Russian an official language in their region.

Including language in the referendum divides Regions. Its west Ukrainian members, such as Taras Chornovil, and the Socialists oppose it. Playing the language card mobilises voters in the east and south, but turns away voters in crucial, swing central Ukraine.

NATO and anti-Americanism. The first Yanukovich government (2002-04) supported NATO membership and dispatched Ukrainian troops to Iraq, where they became the largest non-NATO contingent. Ukraine's 2003 law on national security outlines joining NATO and the EU as strategic goals. Yushchenko brought the troops home in autumn 2005.

Anti-Americanism was deployed in the 2004 election against Yushchenko and his US-born wife (see [UKRAINE: Anti-Americanism an election tool for Kuchma - January 9, 2004](#)). It was promoted through pro-Yanukovich 'technical' candidates (who represented dummy parties to take votes away from the real parties), television adverts and posters. Yanukovich and Regions shifted from Russian to US election consultants between 2004 and 2006-07. Nevertheless, anti-American and anti-NATO sentiment has been exploited in the 2006 and 2007 elections.

Declining NATO support. Since Ukraine declared its intention of seeking NATO membership in 2002, popular support has declined from one-third in the 1990s to less than 20%, for three reasons (see [UKRAINE: Yanukovich NATO switch is mostly tactics - September 18, 2006](#)):

- A large majority of Ukrainians associate the US-led invasion of Iraq with NATO, as the organisation is seen as US-dominated. President's George Bush's Middle East policy has subverted his administration's backing for Ukraine joining NATO.
- Anti-Americanism was whipped up in the 2004 elections and in 2005-06. In 2006, Regions and its leftist allies blocked Ukraine-NATO military exercises, which have been held in Crimea every year since 1997.

UKRAINE: Premier's party raises divisive issues - p. 2 of 2

- Regions, the largest opposition party in parliament in 2005-06, would not back cooperation with NATO, which the first Yanukovich government had supported and has continued since 1994, when Ukraine joined NATO's Partnership for Peace. However, when the second Yanukovich government came to power in August 2006, Regions signed an agreement drawn up by the president that supports cooperation with NATO within its 'intensified dialogue on membership issues' that Ukraine joined in 2005, and the 2003 law on national security.

Political positions. Support is low among the political parties. Two of the Orange parties in 2004-06 were either ambivalent (Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc) or opposed (Socialists). Two members of the second Yanukovich government coalition were opposed (Communists and Socialists). The third member, Regions, has repeatedly changed its stance:

- At the 2002 elections (when it was part of the For a United Ukraine bloc), and during the first Yanukovich government, Regions supported NATO membership.
- In opposition in 2005-06, the party moved 180 degrees to full opposition, not only to membership, but to any level of cooperation with NATO.
- The second Yanukovich government moved to a middle position, in support of cooperation but still opposed to membership.
- At the 2006 and 2007 elections, the party has called for a referendum on the issue.

In the parliament elected in 2006, and in the 2007 election campaign, only Our Ukraine, the third most popular force, has supported NATO membership. Yet no mention was made of NATO by Our Ukraine in 2006, and Our Ukraine-Narodna Samooborona in 2007, in their election programmes, because of its unpopularity among the voters.

Tymoshenko is likely again to lead the second largest faction in the new parliament. Although not in principle opposed to NATO membership, she believes the issue is premature, and before it is taken to a referendum, the public must be educated on what NATO is, how membership will affect the defence of Ukrainian independence and what Ukraine will gain.

Regions does not see educating Ukrainians about NATO as the government's role. Borys Kolesnikov, the head of the Regions campaign, says there is no need to join NATO as there is no military threat to Ukraine and 70% of Ukrainians are opposed.

Referendum difficulties. Regions will face three problems in carrying out a referendum:

- Yushchenko and an Orange coalition and government, if in place after the elections, would oppose it. Yushchenko has described the referendum as a stunt without legal consequences. Regions' threat to launch impeachment proceedings if Yushchenko obstructs a referendum is idle, as there is no legal mechanism for such a step and a law would have to be enacted to establish a commission to investigate the grounds for impeachment. Once the commission reported, a two-thirds vote would still be required in parliament.
- Ukraine's referendum legislation is imperfect.
- Regions would lack sufficient votes in parliament to amend the constitution.

Regions may also initiate local referendums, as it threatened in November 2004.

CONCLUSION: A parliamentary majority sees no need to change Ukraine's tolerant language policies. The biggest impact of the signature campaign for the referendum will be to solidify anti-NATO and thereby anti-American sentiment, both of which Regions has courted since 2004. The new Ukrainian parliament will continue to lack a consensus on NATO membership, ruling out a membership action plan until after the three western Balkan states and Georgia join NATO in 2008-10.

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