

Election 2010

Embracing the bear

Is Yulia Tymoshenko or Viktor Yanukovich Ukraine's best option for improved relations with the Kremlin?

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Volume 3, issue 10 October 2009

With over three months still remaining before the country goes to the polls to select a new head of state, it is already looking increasingly likely that Ukraine's 2010 presidential elections will see Yulia Tymoshenko do battle against Viktor Yanukovich in the decisive early February second round of voting. Making any predictions about the future of Ukraine's perennially shifting political landscape is always a hazardous affair, but at this stage it seems safe to say that lesser candidates such as Arseniy Yatseniuk, Anatoliy Grytsenko, and Serhiy Tyhypko can all be filed away in the draw marked 'potential future parliamentary coalition kingmakers' and forgotten about until after the new president is sworn in early next year. Both Yulia Tymoshenko and Vitkor Yanukovich are two-time prime ministers, and both are native Russian speakers who hail from the country's Russophile south-eastern industrial heartlands. However, beyond birth places the two have little else in common and are likely to become engaged in bitter confrontation as the second round draws closer, with each trying to steal the other's thunder by claiming to hold the key to improved relations with neighbouring Russia.

Ukraine's next president and the Russian Question

Relations with the Kremlin have cast a shadow over each and every administration to take office in Kyiv since the country achieved independence in 1991, and the Russian Question will likely once more prove a key challenge facing whoever takes over from President

Yushchenko early next year. However, unlike in previous Ukrainian presidential elections which have often seen the two leading candidates align themselves as either pro-Western or pro-Russian in direct opposition to one another, on this occasion both frontrunners will be campaigning on a platform of better ties with Russia as well as further integration into the EU. Predictably, both claim to be the only candidate capable of setting bilateral ties with Moscow back on an even keel following years of bitter clashes over everything from interpretations of the two countries' shared Soviet past to Ukraine's stated desire to move out of the Kremlin orbit and join the European family of nations. As they set out to position themselves in front of the electorate as the best choice for all those who favour more cordial ties with Russia, the real question is which of the two favourites for the 2010 presidency is capable of mending fences with Russia while at the same time also looking after Ukraine's national interests and moving the country geopolitically closer to Europe.

Is Putin losing patience with his Donbass ally?

Yulia Tymoshenko's team has often stressed her game-changing ability to build strong relationships with Ukraine's partners in both Moscow and Brussels. This would be a first for independent Ukraine, where previous heads of state have tended to lean one way or the other while often succeeding in pleasing nobody. When first elected in 1994 President Kuchma was far too romantic in his views about Russia but nevertheless it still took him his entire first term in office to finally secure Russian presidential and parliamentary approval of Russia's border with Ukraine. Compared to President Kuchma, Viktor Yanukovich would probably qualify as a zealous Russophile, and yet this unquestioned commitment to closer ties does not guarantee that he will enter the coming race as the Kremlin's preferred candidate. Indeed, there are signs that the Putin regime is ready to call time on its support for Mr. Yanukovich, regarding him as something of a liability who has consistently failed to make the most of the opportunities presented by the Kremlin's petro-dollar leverage and lavish propaganda support. This perceived lack of clout is partly down to

persistent image problems. We have heard a lot about Mr. Yanukovych's alleged political evolution over the last five years, thanks in part to an image overhaul which was assisted by the decision to switch from Russian to American political consultants in 2005. However, below the surface it is hard to identify any real change. Mr. Yanukovych remains prone to public incoherence and, quite frankly, often falls short as a party leader. For evidence of this public awkwardness we need look no further than his speech at the recent Yalta European Strategy summit in late September where he struggled to articulate his party's support for separatism in Georgia and described the Helsinki Agreement as the "Stockholm Agreement". Such blunders are commonplace for Mr. Yanukovych, who counters with a reputation as an honest fellow and a man's man whose words can be taken at face value. This old world charm certainly appeals to millions of the country's voters who were raised in a Soviet world where proletarian heroes such as miners and sheet metalworkers took pride of place in society, but it is not necessarily an image that many modern Ukrainians have for their head of state and may yet serve to obstruct Mr. Yanukovych's bid to secure Kremlin backing.

Between the EU and the Kremlin: playing to Ukraine's natural strengths

Yulia Tymoshenko's main foreign policy strength as a presidential candidate lies in her ability to combine a pragmatic relationship with Russia with an ideological orientation towards Europe. With Hryhoriy Nemyria as Foreign Minister and perhaps Anatoliy Grytsenko as Defence Minister or National Security and Defence Council Secretary, Tymoshenko would have a credible chance of becoming the first Ukrainian president to successfully develop a pragmatic Ukrainian foreign policy towards Russia similar to that pursued by the US and the EU, while at the same time strengthening ties to Euro-Atlantic structures on a more policy-driven basis. A completely pragmatic foreign policy in all directions, as pursued by former President Leonid Kuchma and as advocated by Mr. Yanukovych, is highly unlikely to advance Ukraine's integration into Europe. Despite having accepted

that Ukraine's long-term future lies in closer ties with the EU, Mr. Yanukovich regularly condemns what he terms as the "Euro-romanticism" pursued by politicians who have emerged from the former Orange camp. Instead, he promises to return the country to the deep-seated pragmatism of the Kuchma era. Mr. Yanukovich's Euro-pragmatism would never take Ukraine into the European Union while Mrs. Tymoshenko's mix of Euro-romanticism and Russia-pragmatism would have a fighting chance. From Kravchuk to Kuchma No Ukrainian president has ever yet managed to successfully combine pragmatism with ideology in their foreign policy. The country's first post-independence president Leonid Kravchuk simply co-opted the nationalist movement Rukh's anti-Russian ideology as he had no domestic or foreign policy programme of his own. Meanwhile, his lack of support for domestic reforms or for nuclear disarmament made him unpopular in the West, thus leaving the fledgling state internationally isolated. Meanwhile, former president Leonid Kuchma was too much of a pragmatist while ignoring the ideological component of his foreign policy. His rhetoric in support of integration into Europe was not regarded as plausible in Brussels because it contrasted so vividly with his undemocratic domestic policies, especially during his second term in office. President Yushchenko has in many ways been the opposite of Kuchma - too much of an ideologue in terms of European integration while ignoring the need for pragmatic relations with Russia. This has contributed to deteriorating bilateral ties with Russia, Yushchenko-fatigue in the West and a Western European image of Mr. Yushchenko as a Russophobe almost on a par with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Treason allegations and international realities

Mrs. Tymoshenko's attempts to mend relations with the Kremlin over the past 12 months have brought her into direct confrontation with President Yushchenko, who has accused her of betraying Ukraine's national interests and pursuing a pro-Russian policy. Mrs. Tymoshenko has countered these potentially explosive accusations by pointing out that good relations with Russia have always been and remain a

prerequisite for closer ties to Euro-Atlantic structures. Nobody is looking to pick a fight with the Kremlin, and it has never been in Ukraine's long-term interests to position itself as the prize in a zero-sum game between Russia and the West. The coming election campaign is likely to see President Yushchenko and other nationalistically inclined candidates crank up the accusations of treason against Mrs. Tymoshenko. However, in reality pragmatic and cordial relations are an international norm between neighbouring countries – a fact which is widely recognised both within Ukraine and among the broader international community.

Picking up the pieces from Yushchenko's foreign policy

Since the 2004 Orange Revolution Ukraine's integration into the West has been damaged by many factors other than a lack of foreign policy pragmatism. Domestically over the last five years these factors have included political instability, inter-elite infighting, disunity among the country's pro-Western democratic forces and an inability to pursue a consistent and coordinated foreign policy by all branches of power. President Yushchenko's tough and critical policies towards Russia might go down well in Lviv but they go down badly in Berlin, Paris and Brussels, three capital cities where the majority of the elites have a decidedly pro-Russian orientation. As a result, this kind of anti-Russian rhetoric tends to undermine Ukraine's chances of integration into Europe. Political leaders in Berlin, Paris and Brussels will not support Ukraine's integration into Europe if it is presented on an anti-Russian platform, and this will not change no matter how provocative Russia continues to be towards Ukraine, Georgia and all the other former Soviet republics which the Kremlin likes to refer to as its 'Near Abroad'. A foreign policy of seeking good relations with Russia while pursuing integration into Europe (i.e. combining ideology and pragmatism) could therefore bring Ukraine greater dividends than that pursued at present. Following the 2010 presidential elections, Ukraine's foreign policy needs to mature by combining pragmatic relations with Russia with an ideological orientation to Europe. The lessons of the past eighteen years demonstrate that Ukraine will not

successfully integrate into the West on the basis of ideology alone, as seen in the failure of Yushchenko's presidency to advance Ukraine's national interests in Brussels and Washington while also contributing to poor relations with Russia.

In contrast to this purely ideological approach, a fully pragmatic foreign policy as pursued by Messrs Kuchma and Yanukovich would probably succeed in maintaining the status quo ante but would do nothing to advance Ukraine's integration into Europe. A more balanced approach is called for if Ukraine's national interests of good neighbourly relations with Russia and greater integration into the EU are to be saved. Of the two main presidential candidates who are likely to enter the second round on 7 February only Mrs. Tymoshenko appears to have a chance of producing the combination of ideology and pragmatism in foreign policy that would both facilitate good relations with Russia and further Ukraine's bid for closer integration into Europe. This may well prove a vote-winner across Ukraine - it may also prove popular in Moscow, Brussels, London and Washington.

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