

# The Russian Factor in Ukraine's 2010 Presidential Elections

Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 9

January 14, 2010 09:55 AM Age: 16 hrs

Category: Eurasia Daily Monitor, Home Page, Domestic/Social, Foreign Policy, Russia, Ukraine

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Russian Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol, Ukraine

The Russian factor in this year's Ukrainian presidential elections is essentially a straw man and far less important key than five years ago. Russian political technologists openly worked for one candidate (Viktor Yanukovich), while Moscow allegedly sought to poison the opposition candidate (Viktor Yushchenko) and President Vladimir Putin visited Kyiv on the eve of the first and second rounds to endorse Yanukovich. Putin congratulated Yanukovich on his "victory" two days after the second round –and one day before the central election commission had released the official results.

Mykhailo Kasianov, now in opposition but then an ally of Putin, described the Orange Revolution, the defeat of Yanukovich and election of Yushchenko as the biggest setback of Putin's presidency ([www.glavred.info](http://www.glavred.info), January 11).

Russian policy is now less obviously interventionist. It is highly exaggerated by Ukrainian candidates, particularly by the incumbent Yushchenko, who with single digit poll ratings is fighting for his political life. Yushchenko's 2010 election campaign has retreated to Galicia on an anti-Russian, nationalist platform. He repeatedly labels the two front runners Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Party of Regions leader Viktor Yanukovich, who will enter the second round on February 7, as a "Moscow coalition" (*Ukrayinska Pravda*, January 8).

Yushchenko's anti-Russian platform will likely backfire for three reasons.

Firstly, it has already been attempted by Leonid Kravchuk in the 1994 elections and he lost in the second round by 44 percent to Leonid Kuchma's 52 percent. In the 2010 elections, Yushchenko is not expected to enter the second round. Moreover, Ukrainian opinion polls show that over 80 percent of Ukrainians seek good relations with Russia and do not see any contradiction between Ukraine's integration into Europe and maintaining these ties. Any candidate who campaigns on an anti-Russian platform will consequently weaken their electoral credentials. Finally, Yushchenko's campaign is a regression from patriotism (2004) to nationalism (2010), which has shrunk his electoral appeal to Galicia from that of five years earlier when he swept the west and

central Ukraine.

Yushchenko has focused on daily attacks against Tymoshenko, while ignoring Yanukovich (EDM, January 5, 6), with one theme being her allegedly close working relationship with Putin. Yushchenko claimed that President Dmitry Medvedev's appeal represented indirect support for Tymoshenko (Ukrayinska Pravda, January 3).

The Unified Russia (UR) party has endorsed Yanukovich as its favored candidate, one reason being that it entered a cooperation agreement with the Party of Regions in 2005. "We believe that the Party of Regions mainly represents Russian-speaking voters in Ukraine who live in the east, south and central regions. These are all people who are sympathetic to Russia and want to see the development of Russian-Ukrainian relations," said UR deputy Konstantin Zatulin (Ukrayinska Pravda, December 25).

Tymoshenko's Fatherland Party has only cooperated with the center-right European People's Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament and is the most active Ukrainian party in Strasbourg-Brussels. Yushchenko's Our Ukraine is also a member of the EPP, but he has been persona non grata since 2008 after EPP leaders repeatedly criticized his attempts at undermining the Tymoshenko government. Tymoshenko—but not Yushchenko—attended the December 7, 2009 EPP meeting in Bonn where she was presented as "the future president of Ukraine" (www.tymoshenko.ua, December 9).

Yushchenko has used the Russian factor against Tymoshenko by raising three issues:

1. Claiming that she would indefinitely extend the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol. Yet, among the main candidates only Yanukovich (EDM, November 3, 2009), Serhiy Tihipko and Communist Party leader Piotr Symonenko have supported this step. In addition, no elected president can unilaterally extend the lease beyond 2017, as this would require a constitutional majority to change the constitution to no longer ban foreign bases.
2. Alleging that Tymoshenko will sell off Ukraine's gas pipelines. In February 2007 Tymoshenko mobilized 430 (out of 450) deputies to vote for legislation that bans every form of transfer of the pipelines. In March 2009 she signed an agreement with the EU to modernize the pipelines that excluded Russia, provoking protest by Putin. Four candidates have supported a gas consortium with Russia: Yanukovich, Tihipko, Symonenko and Arseniy Yatseniuk (EDM, November 20, 2009).
3. Arguing that Tymoshenko has backtracked from NATO membership, which appears far-fetched as none of the 18 candidates—including Yushchenko—mention NATO in their 2010 programs (EDM, December 15, 2009). NATO membership is on the backburner because support for this step has not increased during Yushchenko's presidency. Yushchenko prioritized blocking Tymoshenko's return to the post of prime minister in 2006 over the one realistic chance of Ukraine obtaining a Membership Action Plan, Ukraine-fatigue grew from 2007 in Europe and the US, while President Barack Obama is not pursuing NATO enlargement to the same extent as the previous administration.

Within the Tymoshenko team there are NATO supporters and Kuchma-era high levels of cooperation with NATO would revive if Tymoshenko was elected. If Yanukovich is elected, NATO membership would drop from the agenda and cooperation will decline compared to the Kuchma era.

The Russian factor diminished after Yushchenko's last pre-election press conference, which transpired as an anti-Tymoshenko speech ([www.president.gov.ua](http://www.president.gov.ua), [www.pl.com.ua](http://www.pl.com.ua), January 12). Yushchenko revived documents from the criminal case fabricated by Putin and Kuchma against Tymoshenko following the 2000-2001 Kuchmagate scandal to undermine her as an opposition leader. Kuchma was unsuccessful in making such charges stick; nevertheless, Tymoshenko became the only member of the Ukrainian elite who was ever imprisoned (February 2001) (Radio Free Europe, August 15, 2002).

Yushchenko argues that the "Moscow Coalition" (Tymoshenko and Yanukovich) are no different, and is calling on "patriotic Ukrainians" not to vote in the second round. Therefore, the election outcome will hinge on whether "Orange" voters will heed Yushchenko's advice. Listening to Yushchenko would have the effect of dampening the turnout in western Ukraine and ensuring Yanukovich's election (and possibly Yushchenko becoming prime minister). If they ignore Yushchenko's appeal, Tymoshenko will likely be elected as Ukraine's next president.