

Russia Backs Yanukovich in Ukraine's 2010 Elections

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Russian media coverage of the 2010 Ukrainian elections from the outset portrayed it as a two-horse race between Viktor Yanukovich and Yulia Tymoshenko. In the first phase of the election campaign (October-November 2009), the Russian media did not express a preference, but since the first vote the media and ruling Unified Russia party had endorsed Yanukovich (Rossiya 1, NTV, October 19, 24, 27, November 12, 16, 22).

A recent poll by the Russian Public Opinion Foundation found that 53 percent of Russians believe that Yanukovich will be elected as Ukraine's next president and only 14 percent expect that Tymoshenko will triumph (Kyiv Post, January 28). While 47 percent consider that relations with Ukraine will improve if Yanukovich is elected, only 8 percent expect the same from Tymoshenko. In the first phase of the campaign, the Russian media remained neutral towards Tymoshenko, but also ridiculed her because of her alleged obsession with her image and preference for spectacle. The gender bias was evident when the Russian media mocked her tendency to pick on what it considered as trivial matters that are presumably only of interest to women (with men presumably taking care of more substantial issues). During the flu crisis and gas negotiations with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Russian media coverage shifted its emphasis on Tymoshenko towards that of a dynamic politician. It positively portrayed her pragmatism in seeking to work with Moscow on energy issues, a welcome development in Russia and the EU after two winter gas crises in 2006 and 2009. On November 22, 2009 Rossiya 1 described her in positive terms, as cultivating a breakthrough in Russian-Ukrainian energy relations and Putin's relationship with Tymoshenko as a step forward compared to President Viktor Yushchenko.

The visual hatred which Moscow has displayed toward Yushchenko is disingenuous in that it has downplayed the fact that Tymoshenko was a key player in the 2004 Orange Revolution, which Russia sought to halt. Tymoshenko uses Orange rhetoric in the 2010 elections and has drawn on the support of pop stars to revive the image of the 2004 Maidan, where music and carnival sustained protestors for 17 days in wintry weather.

In the second phase of the election campaign, the Russian media moved towards a far more favorable endorsement of Yanukovich, becoming Moscow's favorite as a "pro-Russian." His support for Russian foreign policy included supporting the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and Ukraine's membership of CIS institutions, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Single Economic Space Customs Union. Tymoshenko, on the other hand, was increasingly portrayed in negative terms or simply ignored by the Russian media. Yanukovich emerged as the favorite candidate on the eve of the first round on the Rossiya 1 channel, where he was featured in 11 of the 13 reports and shown speaking in 10 programs. In all cases he was identified as the frontrunner and the likely winner.

This move to endorse Yanukovich was accompanied by the growing portrayal of the Party of Regions as a positive political force and Yanukovich as a decisive leader who would "take the situation in hand and bring order to the country" (Rossiya 1, December 30). These reports also showed lengthy clips of the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kiril's July 2009 visit to Ukraine where he was escorted by Yanukovich. Russian media coverage presented a glowing picture of Yanukovich's support for Medvedev's proposal for a new European security architecture and Ukraine's membership of the Single Economic Space Customs Union. The media also endorsed Yanukovich as better placed to implement policies that are favorable to Russian interests on NATO, the Black Sea Fleet and the Russian language (Rossiya 1, January 10, 12). However, its coverage largely ignored Tymoshenko during the last phase of the first round campaign, focusing instead on Yanukovich and Serhiy Tihipko who were shown more favorably. Tymoshenko was also contrasted with these candidates by her support for the 2004 Orange Revolution (Rossiya 1, NTV, January 10, 12).

In the run up to the first round the Russian media characterized Yanukovich and Tihipko as the "pro-

Russian” candidates who were most favorable to Russian interests –not Tymoshenko. Tymoshenko was either ignored or mocked with the only favorable coverage of her being her pragmatism on energy relations. Yanukovych, in contrast to Tymoshenko, was seen as somebody who would be a better partner for Russia and more reliable, while Tymoshenko was “unpredictable” (Rossiya 1, January 21).

The “Judge for Yourself” talk show on Rossiya 1, attended by Russian and Ukrainian politicians and experts, quoted the Russian political scientist Vyacheslav Nikonov as supporting Yanukovych because, “There are certain preferences: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said that the Unified Russia party has enjoyed closer cooperation with the Party of Regions,” and therefore cooperation with its leader would be more straightforward (Rossiya 1, January 21). Nikonov observed, “They have the same mindset. They are capable of reaching agreements. There is readiness to resolve the issue of the status of the Russian language, for instance.” In addition, Yanukovych has close ties to big business which have strong links with Russia. Other Russian politicians in the television program emphasized Yanukovych’s support for Russian to become a second state language.

Tymoshenko was described on the program as likely to follow Yushchenko as a “puppet of the West,” she opposed elevating the Russian language while her anti-Russian credentials were proven by her 2007 Foreign Affairs article entitled “Containing Russia.” Unified Russia member and Kremlin spin doctor Sergei Markov said, “There is a fear that Yulia Tymoshenko would not express the people’s will, but become a marionette of the external forces that use Ukraine as a tool to do harm to Russia” (Rossiya 1, January 21).

By the first round, Russian politicians and media had endorsed Yanukovych as someone who would do Moscow’s bidding. In contrast, Tymoshenko was not viewed in such a manner. This conclusion undermines Yushchenko’s claim that Tymoshenko and Yanukovych are the same as both are “Moscow projects,” an argument that shows the degree to which Yushchenko’s presidency has elevated personal issues above politics.