

UKRAINE: Pluralistic media will ensure lively campaign

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EVENT: The campaign for the January 17 presidential election officially begins today.

SIGNIFICANCE: The emergence of genuinely pluralistic, largely professional media means that presidential candidates will not encounter deep-seated pro-regime media bias along the lines of what the 'Orange Revolution' protagonists faced in 2004. A dynamic and pluralistic media environment is also likely to serve as an important check against possible electoral fraud. [Go to conclusion](#)

ANALYSIS: Media pluralism is one crucial legacy of the 2004 'Orange Revolution' and the election of then-opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko as president. The variety of political viewpoints offered in the broadcast media has even attracted Russian television hosts who can no longer lead open political discussions at home. Indeed, the level of pluralism in Ukraine is unique among the non-Baltic former Soviet states, where most media outlets -- especially television outlets -- are controlled by the authorities and heavily censored.

Language and nationality. Although media regulation is light by regional standards, there are laws in place requiring broadcasters to provide an equal balance of Russian- and Ukrainian-language content. State-owned print media remain in Ukrainian, whereas newer, privately owned print media are increasingly in Russian (the two largest newspapers by circulation are the Russian-language Segodnya and Fakty i Kommentarii).

Media from Russia -- both print media and cable television channels -- also remain influential. The Ukrainian versions of the Komsomolskaya Pravda, Izvestiya and Argumenty i Fakty newspapers are especially popular; all three cover developments in both Ukraine and Russia.

Internet media. Most Ukrainians receive their news from television, but internet use is rapidly growing. The Orange Revolution was sometimes described as the 'world's first internet revolution' due to widespread online engagement by young opposition activists. Dozens of frequently updated websites provide diverse political views and coverage. Of these outlets, the pro-reform Zerkalo Tyzhnia stands out as one of the most highly regarded online journals in the former Soviet space; such others as Ukrayinska Pravda and Korrespondent also offer high-quality political and investigative reporting.

Diverse television coverage. Nonetheless, television is still by far the most popular outlet for news reporting. Channels are controlled by the state or big business, but still offer access to a variety of political viewpoints and -- in some cases -- sophisticated and critical analysis. Inter, Ukraine's most popular and most controversial channel, had a heavy bias against Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko since her government entered office in December 2007. However, a recent change of ownership at Inter has led to somewhat more balanced (if more anodyne) reporting focused on Tymoshenko and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich, the two leading presidential candidates.

Television coverage sometimes appears to be influenced by channels' ownership and political allegiances:

- **Channel 1.** This state channel is the only one directly controlled by the presidency. Yushchenko promised in 2004 to transform the outlet into a public television channel modelled on the BBC, but this was never implemented. Channel 1 has few viewers and is seen as dreary in comparison to private channels because of its focus on government activities and educational programmes.

- **ICTV, STB, New Channel and M1 Music Channel.** These four channels are owned by oligarch Viktor Pinchuk, and are generally considered politically objective. Pinchuk left politics in 2006 after deciding to concentrate on business and philanthropy. During Leonid Kuchma's presidency, Pinchuk was a leading member of the Dnipropetrovsk clan, represented politically by the Labour Party. Pinchuk is Kuchma's son-in-law, and his earlier acquisitions of businesses and television channels were almost certainly facilitated by this relationship. ICTV airs a popular political talk show hosted by one of Russia's most famous anchors, former NTV host Yevgeniy Kiselev, whose broadcasts in Russia have been restricted to the radio.
- **Ukrayina, NTN (formerly TB Tabachuk).** These two channels are owned by Donetsk oligarch Rinat Akhmetov and Party of Regions businessman Eduard Prutnik. Akhmetov first entered parliament in 2006 as a member of Regions, of which he is a major financier. Before the onset of the crisis, he was the wealthiest person in Eastern Europe, with estimated holdings worth 31 billion dollars (see [UKRAINE: Tycoon may yet become political leader - October 30, 2006](#)). Despite Akhmetov's allegiance to Regions, Tymoshenko has regularly appeared on the Ukrayina channel's popular Shuster-Live programme, reflecting the degree to which media pluralism exists in practice. The programme is hosted by Savik Shuster, another 'refugee' from Russian television. He had hosted a talk show on its NTV channel until 2004, but was removed following criticism from then-President Vladimir Putin.
- **Inter.** Inter is primarily watched in Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine. The channel was owned by Ihor Pluzhnikov, an ally of the now-marginal Social Democratic Party-United (SDPUo), until his mysterious death in 2005. The SDPUo was led by Viktor Medvedchuk, who also headed Kuchma's presidential administration; this gave the authorities great influence over Inter. After Pluzhnikov's death, the channel passed into the ownership of industrialist Valeriy Khoroshkovskiy (who controls a 61% stake) and RosUkrEnergo (RUE) co-owner Dmytro Firtash. As the SDPUo became marginalised, Inter became a mouthpiece for Regions and began heavily slanting its news coverage against Tymoshenko. It is likely that Firtash directly influenced the channel's coverage; he had close ties to a group of Regions deputies who opposed Tymoshenko's attempts to remove RUE from the Russian-Ukrainian gas relationship (see [UKRAINE: Opposition party is split ahead of key vote - March 31, 2009](#)). However, Firtash was recently ousted as part-owner, and Inter is starting to tone down its anti-Tymoshenko bias.
- **1+1.** Pro-Yushchenko oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky purchased 49% of 1+1 in July from Central European Media Enterprises, the channel's owners since 2005. The channel has high ratings in Ukrainian-speaking western and central regions, and has the second-highest number of viewers after Inter. Kolomoisky provided financing for Yushchenko's 2004 candidacy and the Orange Revolution, as well as Yushchenko's Our Ukraine bloc in the 2006 and 2007 parliamentary elections. He has been hostile to both Tymoshenko and the Donetsk clan (see [UKRAINE: Pryvat-Yushchenko tie spoils anti-graft aim - August 28, 2007](#)). Like Inter, 1+1 includes a popular mix of politics as well as local and foreign-dubbed entertainment programmes. Kolomoisky's purchase of a major stake is unlikely to change its balanced coverage, given his history of non-interference in other Ukrainian media outlets that he partly owns.
- **Channel 5.** Channel 5 is owned by Foreign Minister and former National Bank Chairman Petro Poroshenko. Channel 5 (together with Era) was one of only two television stations available to the opposition in the 2004 elections. Poroshenko has been a close ally of Yushchenko since 2001, when they established Our Ukraine; in 2004, Poroshenko helped finance Yushchenko's campaign.

Ukraine's industrialists often have clear links to particular political parties (see [UKRAINE: 'Orange' allies fight over economic policy - May 20, 2008](#)). However, such oligarchs tend to diversify their support across the political spectrum as a means of maintaining good relations with whoever might prevail in a genuinely competitive presidential election. This helps account for the diversity of programming and for the larger channels' provision of balanced coverage amid a highly politically charged environment.

CONCLUSION: A variety of media outlets will provide extensive coverage of the presidential election campaign, permitting lively debate and free access to different viewpoints. Such Kuchma-era censorship as secret instructions sent from the presidential administration to television channels no longer exists. Although broadcast media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a small number of leading industrialists, the diversity of their political interests -- and a desire to hedge their bets ahead of a hard-fought electoral contest -- will ensure that Ukraine's media environment remains the most dynamic and pluralistic in the CIS.

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