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Ukraine's Presidential Hopefuls Lay Out Their Programs

by Taras Kuzio

The deadline to register candidates for Ukraine's presidential election was November 9, after which the seven candidates who were refused registration were given two additional days to resubmit their applications. On November 13, the Central Election Commission will confirm the final list of candidates for the January 17, 2010, presidential vote.

The main reason some candidates were denied registration was their failure to prove they had provided the mandatory \$300,000 deposit, which candidates that fail to make it to the second round of voting will forfeit. Although the deposit is large, political forces might have good reason to back the registration of so-called technical candidates. First, they mean additional representatives on the election boards that count the votes and, second, they could emerge as a potential ally in the second round.

In 1999, 13 candidates vied for the post, while in 2004, there were 24. This time around, 18 people will attempt to become the next president of Ukraine. Those 18 candidates can be divided into three groups. First, there are the two leading contenders -- Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Party of Regions head Viktor Yanukovich, each of whom are polling about 20-30 percent support.

The second-tier candidates include incumbent President Viktor Yushchenko, former Foreign Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, former Ukrainian Central Bank head Serhiy Tihipko, and parliament speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn. Support for these candidates is in the 3-8 percent range.

The rest can be considered technical or spoiler candidates, including former Defense Minister Anatoliy Hrytsenko, nationalist Svoboda party leader Oleh Tyahnybok, Free Democrats party leader Mykhaylo Brodsky, and eight others who have the backing of no more than 1 percent of the electorate.

Setting Out Programs

It's interesting to take a look at the domestic- and foreign-policy programs of the first- and second-tier candidates. The platforms reveal many similarities, particularly in the realm of populist social initiatives. The programs of four of the candidates bear distinct hallmarks of Soviet nostalgia.

With an eye on the former Communist Party supporters that have defected to the Party of Regions over the last five years, Yanukovich has adopted rhetoric about economic growth and political stability that echoes what one hears in Russia these days.

Yatsenyuk's campaign, which has been widely criticized for adopting a military-camouflage color scheme, is dominated by Soviet-style slogans such as "New Industrialization" and "A Healthy And Educated People." Lytvyn's program also looks backward with an eye toward gaining the support of former Socialist Party (SPU) voters in the small towns and rural areas of central Ukraine. SPU leader Oleksandr Moroz discredited himself and his party when he defected from the Orange coalition in July 2006.

Former Central Bank head Tihipko, who is also a successful private banker from Dnipropetrovsk, is predictably emphasizing the central role of economic policy, thereby echoing the 1994 campaign of former President Leonid Kuchma. Tihipko's slogans include, somewhat strangely, "The Economy Above All Else" and "Ukraine's Interests Above All Else." Yanukovych likewise emphasizes "A Strong Economy -- A Strong Country."

The eastern Ukraine candidates -- including Tihipko and Yanukovych -- place less emphasis on democracy, the rule of law, and corruption. In fact, Yanukovych's program does not even mention corruption.

Popular Populist Measures

Traditionally, Ukrainian presidential candidates promise to battle corruption energetically, but once in office they do little to realize this pledge. Combating corruption requires political will that exists in Georgia, but not in Ukraine.

The German think tank Transparency International has reported that Ukraine made some progress against corruption in 2005 and 2006, but since 2007 has fallen back to the dismal ratings of the Kuchma era. In contrast, Georgia has improved its rating each year since 2004. In the 2008 ranking, Ukraine came in at 134th, while Georgia had risen to 67th.

In 2004, Yushchenko promised "to send the bandits to jail," but five years later Ukraine's elites remain above the law and Ukrainian "bandits" have gone to jail in the United States and Germany, but not in Ukraine. This time around, only Tymoshenko's program explicitly condemns the capture of the Ukrainian state by oligarchs.

Populism is a traditional hallmark of Ukrainian presidential elections. In 2004, Yushchenko offered his "10 Steps" program that included many social populist initiatives. The Party of Regions recently introduced legislation in parliament to increase social payments, repeating a tactic then-Prime Minister Yanukovych used in 2004 when he doubled pensions. That initiative was backed by all parliamentary factions except Tymoshenko's and was signed into law by Yushchenko.

The measure casts doubt on whether the International Monetary Fund will disburse the fourth tranche of a stand-by agreement loan before the election, opening up the real possibility of default. Nonetheless, Yanukovich's current program cynically declares the 2010 election is an opportunity to "clean out the populists and political adventurers from the Ukrainian government."

Of the seven main candidates, only Yushchenko and Tymoshenko prioritize national and religious matters. As in 2004, Yanukovich supports elevating Russian to the status of a second state language, a step also supported by Symonenko, Tihipko, and, possibly, Lytvyn. As in 2004, the second round will most likely again give voters two positions on the state language: Ukrainian (Tymoshenko) versus Ukrainian-Russian (Yanukovich).

Foreign

Policy

In the foreign-policy domain, none of the candidates mentions NATO in any form, a pattern that repeats earlier elections (Yushchenko and Our Ukraine have never included NATO membership in their election programs). Of the seven main candidates, only Tymoshenko and Yushchenko support EU membership. Symonenko and Yatsenyuk oppose it, and the other three are ambivalent.

Yanukovich and Symonenko support Ukraine's full membership of the Commonwealth of Independent States' Single Economic Space (SES). Countries cannot be in two customs unions at the same time and therefore joining the SES is impossible if Ukraine signs a free-trade

agreement with the EU next year, an important nuance that will be missed by the average Yanukovych supporter.

Yatsenyuk's proposed Eastern European union of Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan with Kyiv as its capital is surprisingly similar to the SES. Yatsenyuk's program calls for joint programs by these eight countries in the fields of energy, transportation and communications, industrial production and exports, science and technology, and the military-industrial complex.

Three leading candidates have distinct foreign-policy proposals. If elected, Yanukovych would pursue a pro-Russian multivector foreign policy, in contrast to the largely pro-Western multivectorism Kuchma pursued in his two terms in office. Tymoshenko has outlined a pro-European foreign policy that links domestic progress in reforms to Ukraine's integration into Europe.

Yatsenyuk moved from his pro-Western position as foreign minister and parliament speaker to a Ukrainian third-way "isolationist-nationalist" platform that has been developed by Russian consultants in his team since June. Although elected to parliament in 2007 as one of the top five candidates of the pro-Western Our Ukraine-People's Self Defense bloc, Yatsenyuk now opposes NATO and EU membership.

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