



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

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Presidential Election in Ukraine

by Łukasz Adamski

After the first round of Ukraine's presidential election, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko increased her chances of defeating Viktor Yanukovich, the leader of the Party of Regions, in the second round on 7 February, even though the odds by a slight margin are still in favor of the head of the opposition.

According to official results, the first round was carried by Yanukovich, with 35% of the vote, against Tymoshenko's 25%. Next came Serhiy Tihipko (13%), a politician and businessman who spectacularly returned to politics after a break of several years, and Arseniy Yatsenyuk (7%), a former foreign minister and Supreme Council president. Ukraine's incumbent president Viktor Yushchenko scored a pitiful 5.5% of the vote.

Yanukovich's support was almost identical with the Party of Region's result in the 2007 parliamentary election—hardly an impressive feat for a party opposing the Tymoshenko government at a time of a dire economic crisis. For the same reason, the first-round performance of the sitting prime minister is seen as a relative success, especially in view of poorer predictions from opinion polls. In the light of her result, Tymoshenko's chances for a final victory have gone up, equalizing the rivalry between the two politicians—although opinion polls still give Yanukovich an edge of several percentage points. With this relatively favorable result, Tymoshenko may indeed attempt to block Parliament's dissolution, which was promised by Yanukovich, even if she loses the final battle. That would entail the continued operation of her cabinet, spelling a scenario of debilitating cohabitation in a state where much of the executive power is exercised by the government.

A big success was scored by Tihipko, head of the electoral campaign for Yanukovich in 2004, and now his opponent. Targeting mainly the Russian-speaking population, he painted himself as a younger, more dynamic, professional and untainted-in-the-past alternative to the Party of Regions leader. Laying less emphasis on questions of identity and more on modernization of the state, he proved acceptable to Western Ukraine's electorate, too. Thus, if Tymoshenko wins, Tihipko will stand chances of replacing the ineffective Yanukovich as the standard-bearer for Eastern Ukraine's interests. It is also likely that the Tihipko-built bloc will improve its performance in the next parliamentary election, with its leader rising to the status of a candidate for the state's highest offices. Tihipko has already said he would not back any candidate in the second round, which boosts Tymoshenko's chances.

Yushchenko's result reflects voters' disappointment with his ineffectiveness as a politician promising the rule of law, transparency and modernization. It is unclear what prodded the president to run despite having so poor chances of success. Not inconceivably, a major motive was to prevent Tymoshenko's election as president, in the hope that such an outcome would be conducive to his future political activities. Significantly, Yushchenko almost refrained from criticizing Yanukovich.

The turnout, lower than in previous presidential polls, is a sign of the electorate's frustration with the shape of the country's political scene. On the other hand, the peaceful course of the election and the fact that as many as six exit polls were conducted indicate that democracy had been taking root in Ukraine.