



BULLETIN

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Ukraine's Presidential Election and Prospects for the State's Modernization and Integration with the EU

by Łukasz Adamski

Viktor Yanukovych, leader of the opposition Party of Regions, has the best chance of winning the election. His most dangerous contender is the present Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. While the probability of a new president reforming the state and bringing it closer to EU standards is small, the outcome of this election is unlikely to impair the dynamics of relations between Ukraine and the EU. This could happen only in the event of mass-scale vote-buying by the main runners' election staffs, or attempts at electoral fraud—a scenario some observers do not rule out.

Presidential Election. The voting will be held on 17 January 2010. As none of the eighteen candidates can be expected to score the 50% plus one vote, presumably there will be a run-off on 7 February, between Yanukovych and, most probably, Tymoshenko.

Yanukovych appears to be better placed for winning. He has been well ahead in the polls, maintaining throughout the campaign a lead of at least 7% over the prime minister. Tymoshenko has charisma and the ability to rally the electorate behind her, but the two years of serving as prime minister at the time of crisis, and the disenchantment of the voters who supported the Orange Revolution in 2004, have affected her chances.

Tymoshenko is a proponent of Ukraine's accession to the EU. She relies for votes on the Right-bank Ukraine electorate, a majority of whom support that policy. Yanukovych, for his part, is blatantly pro-Russian on a rhetorical level: he is demanding international-legal recognition of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia and his electoral platform is promising no more than merely a "strategic partnership" with the EU. Be it as it may, the Party of Regions' platform acknowledges the need for the country to join the Union and, what's more, big business, which has a stake in closer links with the EU, plays an important role in this political grouping.

Of the other serious contenders, the following merit attention: Arseniy Yatsenyuk, former minister of foreign affairs; Serhiy Tihopko, politician and businessman, former president of the National Bank of Ukraine; Volodymyr Lytvyn, chairman of the Supreme Council; Petro Symonenko, leader of the Communists; and Viktor Yushchenko, the incumbent president. With their single-digit support they are unlikely to threaten Tymoshenko's progress to the second round of election, yet they are fighting for the best possible results in the hope that their scores will translate into parliamentary election results of the political parties with which they are affiliated, or offer them prospects for positions in a government to be formed after the presidential election. In the area of foreign policy, all these candidates, except Yushchenko, opt for integration with Russia or for a "non-bloc" status construed as keeping at an equal distance from Russia and the EU alike.

Quite likely a losing runner will claim electoral irregularities and will attempt to delay the swearing-in of a new president for as long as possible, by filing complaints with the court (a tactic facilitated by poor quality of the law and of law enforcement)—or could even mount a blockade of the Parliament or of the Central Electoral Commission. Some Ukrainian observers have warned that the election results could be distorted by vote-buying by the main candidates' staffers. They do not even rule out electoral fraud, albeit perpetrated more subtly and on a lesser scale than in 2004.

Presumably, if Yanukovych wins the election, he will cause the dissolution of the Supreme Council so as to make sure that he has a stable majority in a new parliament. A convenient day for parliamentary elections would be 30 May, when local government elections are to be held. Tymoshenko for her part will seek to build up her support base in this parliament and only should this fail will she opt for elections to the Supreme Council.

Prospects for the State's Modernization and Integration with the EU. Both Tymoshenko and Yanukovych are interested in the development of relations with the EU. Their priorities include the signing of an association agreement; the lifting by the EU of the visa requirement for Ukrainian citizens; and easier access to European institutions' funds. Progress in the area of integration with the EU will depend on a new Ukrainian president's ability to introduce the rule of law, to improve the efficiency of the country's political system, and to launch vast social and political reforms. However, the odds are long on this. The two forefront runners both bear a part of responsibility for the lack of transparency that has come to be a hallmark of Ukraine's political culture, for the intertwining of business and politics, low level of responsibility for the state, nihilistic attitude towards the law, and for corruption which has spread to nearly all areas of social life (Ukraine's Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index ranking has been sliding from year to year, to 146th out of 180 in the 2009 survey). Moreover, as a result of the 2006 constitutional reform, the president, while retaining numerous powers (in particular concerning the conduct of foreign and security policy) and a say in the filling of various key positions, lost political control of the government. This has produced a destructive cohabitation of the president and consecutive prime ministers. To reform the state, the president should be working closely with the prime minister and he should enjoy broad support in the Supreme Council. Yet, in fact, the building of a support base for reforms in parliament is going to be difficult, because in Ukraine parliamentary seats traditionally go to business people or persons closely dependent on business groups, and the business communities which finance the activities of political parties are obviously not interested in changes that would limit political lobbying. Neither will the dissolution of the Supreme Council necessarily lead to the emergence in the elections of a stable pro-president majority. Indeed, according to a Razumkov Center poll, 31% of Ukrainian citizens said they would vote for the Party of Regions, 21.5%—for Yulia Tymoshenko's Bloc, 8% for the Yatsenyuk-led Front for Change and 5% for the Communists. Lytvyn's bloc and Our Ukraine party headed (in violation of the Constitution) by the incumbent president scored 4% each, while the nationalist Svoboda enjoys a 3% backing.

Integration with the EU requires deregulation, de-bureaucratization of the economy, improved legal security, the combating of corruption, and efforts aimed at adjusting Ukrainian standards to those in effect in the EU. An urgent need for such efforts has been highlighted by the global economic crisis that has hit Ukraine hard. The country's 2009 GDP will be almost 15% down from a year earlier; the hryvna has devalued 60% in just one year and is in danger of further depreciation; and it is only due to an IMF loan that the state has been able to perform its fundamental functions. Yet the elites either fail to understand the consequences of abandoning reforms—or they deliberately put interests of their own political-business community before the elementary interests of the state. Significantly, the Tymoshenko government has failed to meet most of its commitments to the IMF, and last October the Ukrainian Supreme Council voted in a bill, proposed by the Party of Regions and backed by Our Ukraine and the Lytvyn Bloc (the latter two in the ruling coalition), on an over 10% increase in minimum pay and social standards. That law, immediately signed by the president, will add considerably to budget expenditure.

Recommendations for Poland. In the run-up to the election, Poland and the EU should make it known to all the main candidates that honest voting is a prerequisite for giving the new president a credit of confidence and for continued efforts to bring Ukraine closer to the EU. Poland and the European Union must be prepared to undertake mediation, if and as necessary, in the event of an escalation of political conflict in the wake of the presidential election and in response to credible reports of electoral fraud, if there are any.

In the coming years Poland should—regardless of who becomes the president of Ukraine—continue its policy of support for Eastern Partnership and, as part of that initiative, support the implementation of concrete projects aimed at modernizing Ukraine. Discouraging corruption is the most urgent challenge. Lobbying for the lifting of the visa requirement for Ukrainians is also important, because, as larger numbers of Ukrainian citizens come to know EU living standards, this understanding should become a powerful impulse for the modernization of the country. On the other hand, resuming efforts within the EU to promote the granting to Ukraine of “European perspective” (promise of membership) would be premature.