

## Ukraine's Election and the Value of a Divided Electorate

The first round of the Ukrainian election, which was held on the 17th of January, was inconclusive making a runoff, scheduled for February 7th, necessary. At first glance, the contrast between the two candidates in the runoff, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoschenko the heroine of the 2004 Orange Revolution, and Viktor Yanukovich, the man whose fraudulent attempt to claim victory led directly to the Orange Revolution, is stark. According to the most common narrative, Tymoschenko is viewed as pro-west and likely to bring Ukraine closer into the European orbit while Yanukovich is closer to Russia and likely to strengthen ties with Russia while weakening relations with Europe and the U.S.

The reality is that both candidates will have to continue the extremely difficult task of balancing a divided country between Russia and the west while trying to reenergize an economy which has been badly hurt by the global economic downturn. It is very likely that the winning candidate will not have a sufficient mandate, or enough votes in parliament, to quickly change the course of Ukraine. Moreover, the electorate is sufficiently polarized, hence the need for the runoff between these two candidates, that no president will be able to abandon the west in favor of Russia, or do the reverse. Additionally, in recent years, Tymoschenko's western orientation has become more equivocal as [she too has sought to improve Ukraine's relations with Russia](#).

Speculation about who will win the election, and how that person will govern, can overshadow the democratic advances Ukraine has made since the Orange Revolution of 2004, particularly when contrasted with Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, the other two post-Soviet countries to have Color Revolutions in the last decade. All three Color Revolutions were, at the time they occurred, hailed as democratic advances, but Ukraine is the only one of the three countries that can accurately be said to have experienced greater democratization since those dramatic events. According to Freedom House, for example, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have the same level of democracy as they did before the Rose and Tulip Revolutions, while Ukraine has become more democratic than it was before the Orange Revolution.

Politically, Ukraine remains a divided country with Yanukovich's Party of the Regions strong in the eastern part of the country and Tymoschenko far stronger in the west. Nonetheless, these divisions are being worked out, to some extent, in a democratic context. This is not to suggest that the election in Ukraine is simply a democratic election between two candidates with different views. There is legitimate fear among many in the west that a victory for Yanukovich would slow down or halt the democratic advances the country has made in the last few years. Additionally, in Eastern Ukraine, which includes the industrial base of the country, the Party of Regions has put a strong patronage system in place, one with a few echoes of the old Soviet regime. The party has, for example, relied on close ties between local government, industry and the Party of the Regions to ensure that it is able to be involved in the distribution of jobs and economic

opportunities. This, not surprisingly, also includes occasionally intimidating supporters of other parties, threatening them with losses of livelihood and similar lower level forms of harassment. During elections, fraud is still more common in the east than in the west of the country.

While the Party of Regions has used some undemocratic means to bolster their popularity in the eastern and southern parts of the country, they also enjoy a legitimate base of support as well. The party's more pro-Russian position reflects the views of many in the east of the country where warm feelings towards Russia are strong and many ethnic Russians live. The corresponding coolness of the Party of Regions towards strong Ukrainian nationalism also resonates well with voters in Eastern Ukraine. For much of the time immediately following the Orange Revolution, the Party of Regions was also able to point to solid economic growth in the eastern part of the country. This, of course, changed substantially with the global economic downturn in late 2008.

Ironically, the continued presence of Yanukovich and his Party of the Regions as a political force in Ukraine, although on the surface representing an obstacle to democracy because of the nature of that party's rule in the eastern part of the country, may be one of the reasons Ukraine has democratized more since its Color Revolution than either Georgia or Kyrgyzstan has since theirs. The strength of the Party of Regions made it impossible for Ukraine to develop the one party, or strongman, systems which emerged in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan beginning in 2004-2005. Because the Party of Regions remained politically relevant and, in the eastern part of Ukraine, even dominant, neither of the parties of the Orange Revolution, Yulia Timoschenko's Block Yulia Timoschenko (BYT) or Viktor Yuschenko's Our Ukraine could emerge as the sole locus of political power in Ukraine during the last six years.

The failure of the Orange Revolution to completely overrun the previous administration and political regime has therefore been both a facilitator and limiting factor for Ukraine's democratic development beginning in 2005. Unlike in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, after the Color Revolution the defeated candidate did not slink away to either to political obscurity or to Moscow when his efforts to steal the election were thwarted. Instead, Yanukovich remains, while not always a force for democracy, an important political leader in Ukraine — and perhaps its next president.