

UKRAINE: Tough campaign will test Tymoshenko's acuity

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SUBJECT: The implications of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's abortive attempt to form a coalition with the opposition Party of Regions.

SIGNIFICANCE: The collapse of coalition negotiations between the Tymoshenko Bloc and the Party of Regions, coupled with the domestic impact of the global recession, has damaged Tymoshenko's presidential candidacy. Opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich now has a significant lead in the polls, but Tymoshenko's political prowess should not be underestimated. [Go to conclusion](#)

ANALYSIS: Negotiations for a 'coalition of national unity' between the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc (BYuT) and the opposition Party of Regions (known as 'Regions') collapsed on June 8, in the fourth failed attempt to unite Ukraine's two largest political parties (see [UKRAINE: New coalition could reshape the constitution - May 1, 2009](#)). The current coalition includes BYuT, Our Ukraine-People's Self-Defence (NUNS) and parliamentary Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn's bloc; had talks succeeded, the coalition would have expanded to include Regions.

The current coalition is highly fractious and does not possess a constitutional majority: one-third of NUNS is loyal to President Viktor Yushchenko and former presidential chief of staff Viktor Baloha, and has refused to cooperate with BYuT. At the June 27 party congress of Our Ukraine, one of nine parties in the NUNS bloc, Yushchenko called on NUNS deputies to withdraw from the coalition -- but stopped short of ordering Our Ukraine ministers to resign from the government. The government already has four vacant ministerial seats: transport, finance, defence and foreign policy.

Implications of talks' failure. Of the two main political forces that attempted to negotiate an expanded coalition, BYuT (and Tymoshenko personally) will suffer more from voter desertion than Regions:

- Tymoshenko and BYuT campaigned in the 2006 and 2007 elections against any coalition with Regions.
- In August 2006, BYuT was the only parliamentary bloc that refused to sign a Yushchenko-initiated agreement ahead of presenting Yanukovich's prime ministerial candidacy to parliament.
- In a related reversal, BYuT supported the president's hard line towards the pro-Yanukovich 'anti-crisis coalition' that led to a decree disbanding parliament in April 2007 and pre-term elections that September.

Campaigning amid crisis. Over and above the coalition collapse, Tymoshenko is seeking to win a presidential election as head of government during the worst economic crisis Ukraine has faced since the fall of the Soviet Union (see [UKRAINE: Real sector is yet to share financial upturn - May 22, 2009](#)). It is inevitable that this association with economic decline will hurt Tymoshenko's presidential candidacy. According to a June poll, Yanukovich's lead has grown, and 35% of Ukrainians would support him (against Tymoshenko's 22%) were a presidential election held now. Indeed, Tymoshenko's falling support probably made her more inclined to seek a coalition with Regions, which would have included constitutional reforms to transform Ukraine into a full parliamentary system. This would have negated the need to hold a presidential election; parliament would have elected Yanukovich as president, and Tymoshenko would have remained as premier.

BYuT and Tymoshenko may have had yet another reason for favouring a coalition with Regions: it is likely that the recession has had a severe impact on the party's financial backers, raising questions about how Tymoshenko will fund her presidential run.

Yushchenko's response. The negotiations between BYuT and Regions gave Yushchenko further ammunition to continue his attacks on Tymoshenko. Yushchenko continues to assert that the premier has formed an alliance with the Kremlin, using former presidential chief of staff Viktor Medvedchuk as an intermediary between Moscow and Kiev. The president has claimed that such an arrangement threatens Ukraine's sovereignty and democracy.

However, Yushchenko's allegations only play well with voters in nationalist-minded western Ukraine, the heartland of the pro-Western, pro-reform 'Orange' electorate. Yushchenko is aiming to undermine Tymoshenko's popular support in this region, and thereby boost the popularity of her main rival, Arseniy Yatsenyuk. With only 3% support, Yushchenko has no realistic possibility of winning re-election; press reports suggest Yushchenko considers Yatsenyuk to be his rightful successor.

Tymoshenko's strengths. Polls indicate that either Tymoshenko or Yatsenyuk will face Yanukovych in the second round of the election, which will be held in the (almost certain) event that no candidate garners 50% or more of the vote in the first round. While Tymoshenko's support has fallen, a number of factors suggest that she remains a competitive contender for the presidency:

- Her confidence and determination have served her well since she first launched her business career in the late 1980s, and she remains one of the few Ukrainian politicians with genuine charisma.
- The 2002, 2006 and 2007 parliamentary elections showed that pre-election polls underestimated popular support for BYuT. A similar dynamic may have transpired with respect to Tymoshenko's presidential candidacy; Tymoshenko's skill as a campaigner is likely to boost her popular support as the campaign rolls on.
- Although the campaign is still in its early stages, Yatsenyuk's support may have plateaued, and he has not yet overtaken Tymoshenko in the polls. Tymoshenko has a loyal base of around 14% of voters who will support her almost unconditionally.
- If she does prevail over Yatsenyuk in the first round, she will probably beat Yanukovych in the second round. One factor is negative voting: in 2004, western and central Ukrainian voters voted solidly against Yanukovych, and it is likely that they will do the same in 2010. A second factor is that in pre-election polls, the proportion of Orange voters is consistently higher than the total support expressed for Regions and the Communist Party (50% to 40%, respectively, according to a June survey).
- Although Tymoshenko has lost support in western Ukraine (down from 24% to 18% over the last two months), this has been somewhat offset by her growing support in central (from 20% to 23%) and southern Ukraine (from 3.0% to 5.5%). The election of Leonid Kuchma in 1994 and Yushchenko in 2004 show that the vote in central Ukraine is critical in deciding the outcome of presidential elections.

Election outlook. Neither criticisms of Tymoshenko's attempt to form a coalition with Regions nor the president's suggestions that she has allied herself with Moscow will necessarily cost her votes in central Ukraine. Furthermore, she may be able to build on BYuT's remarkable 2007 parliamentary election breakthrough among eastern and southern voters (see [UKRAINE: Yushchenko needs Tymoshenko as ally again - October 5, 2007](#)).

However, Tymoshenko will have to compete against Yatsenyuk for the Orange vote, especially in western Ukraine. Yatsenyuk has received ample airtime from Inter, Ukraine's largest television station, but this has proved a double-edged sword. While the media coverage has contributed to Yatsenyuk's rising popularity, it also suggests that there might be links between the former parliamentary speaker and Dmytro Firtash, co-owner of Inter and controversial former gas intermediary RosUkrEnergo. Tymoshenko will undoubtedly play up Yatsenyuk's possible ties to Firtash during the campaign.

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While it is possible that Tymoshenko and Yatsenyuk will face off in a second round, it is more likely that the premier will run against Yanukovich. Her electoral prospects will be bolstered if the economy shows signs of recovery in six months' time; regardless of economic realities, Tymoshenko will try to make the case that she -- unlike Yanukovich -- took full responsibility for dealing with the recession, reinforcing her 'tough' image among voters. Nonetheless, Yanukovich has a strong base of support in eastern Ukraine, and a race between these two candidates would be fiercely contested.

CONCLUSION: Tymoshenko and BYuT have inevitably suffered from some voter backlash in western Ukraine, but this has been offset by slight increases in her support among central and eastern voters. The first round of the election, in which she will face a bitter fight with Yatsenyuk for Orange voters' support, will test the premier's considerable political prowess.

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