

Why Yulia Tymoshenko should be president

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Ukrainians, thankfully, no longer believe in messiahs. Meanwhile, the global financial crisis, which has badly affected Ukraine, has focused the minds of voters on bread-and-butter issues. Yulia Tymoshenko is the first Ukrainian presidential candidate to be a sitting prime minister and she, unlike her domestic critics, has not shrugged from taking responsibility for combating the effects of the global crisis on Ukraine.

Where Ukraine differs from established democracies is in how presidential elections have traditionally represented a choice of civilizations. In the 1999 elections, communism was defeated by incumbent President Leonid Kuchma. And, in 2004, Ukrainians chose European democracy over Eurasian oligarchy and autocracy.

The last five years could have entrenched the democratic European choice made in 2004, thereby making it impossible to contemplate Victor Yanukovich seeking revenge for his defeat. That has not happened. Yanukovich was brought back from marginalization by President Victor Yushchenko in September 2005 and made prime minister.

Yanukovich and senior Party of Regions leaders would understand his election as Ukraine's next president as revenge. They have never accepted responsibility for committing election fraud in 2004. They have never recognized the December 2004 ruling of the Ukrainian Supreme Court to annul the second-round results.

All politicians, including Tymoshenko, have a right to evolve, politically mature and moderately change their views. Nevertheless, Tymoshenko has been consistent in her support for six core ideological positions that differentiate her from other candidates, particularly front-runner Yanukovich.

1. Fighter for Ukraine's democracy. Tymoshenko was a major leader in the opposition to Kuchma's regime and is the only member of Ukraine's elites who has been imprisoned. Tymoshenko jointly led the Ukraine Without Kuchma and Arise Ukraine! Movements against Kuchma's regime. She supported his impeachment, established the Front for National Salvation and was the major mobilizer of protesters in the Orange Revolution.

Tymoshenko has supported a parliamentary constitution that represents moving Ukraine to a European political system and lessens the threat of the re-emergence of autocracy. Tymoshenko alone supported the implementation of the Orange Revolutionary slogan "Bandits to jail!" which sought to ensure Ukraine's elites would be accountable to voters and the rule of law.

2. Fighter against corruption. Tymoshenko fought corruption in the energy sector for the last decade since she was first deputy prime minister in the 1999-2001 Yushchenko government. Tymoshenko alone fought against the gas intermediary RosUkrEnergo backed by the president, sections of Our Ukraine and the Party of Regions that the gas lobby took over. Malfeasance in the energy sector has always been the largest form of corruption in Ukraine and the Tymoshenko government can be credited with the removal of RosUkrEnergo and, thereby, the largest source of corruption from Ukraine.

3. Honest privatization. Tymoshenko's 2005 government was the first to implement a non-corrupt and transparent privatization, that of Kryvorizhstal steel plant. The re-privatization brought 10 times the sum into Ukraine than had been paid for in July 2004 when Victor Pinchuk and Rinat Akhmetov privatized it for a song.

The re-privatization of Kryvorizhstal also reflected Tymoshenko's openness to foreign investment rather than the economic protectionism supported by Ukraine's oligarchs. Her government tabled well-reasoned, transparent privatization plans designed to boost the government budget in order to honor election pledges to repay lost Soviet-era bank deposits that were blocked by the president.

4. Business and politics. Big business is represented in the Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko as it is in all five parliamentary political groups. Nevertheless, big business and oligarchs do not dominate BYuT, a situation that contrasts sharply with the Party of Regions.

The Yushchenko presidency has not brought a separation of business and politics to Ukraine. Neither "bandits to jail!" nor amnesty have taken place. The election of Tymoshenko would prevent big business from running the country and could potentially lead to a separation of business and politics. Meanwhile, the election of Yanukovich would lead to the takeover of Ukraine by oligarchs. Furthermore, a Tymoshenko presidency will push to eliminate bureaucratic red tape that suffocates many small and medium sized enterprises.

5. Social justice. Tymoshenko has supported socially conscious budgets and social justice on issues such as the return of lost Soviet bank deposits. The latter was included in Yushchenko's 2004 election program and was partially implemented in 2008 by the Tymoshenko government. Social justice is not the same as "populism," but is the norm in the European Union and Canadian democracies where social-market economies prevail.

6. European Integration. Tymoshenko has always supported Ukraine's integration into NATO and the European Union. That Ukraine's NATO membership is now on a backburner is not a consequence of Tymoshenko's policies but of missed opportunities by Yushchenko, especially in 2006 when Ukraine could have joined a Membership Action Plan.

The 2005 and current Tymoshenko governments pushed through legislation that saw Ukraine join the World Trade Organization, a major step to Ukraine signing a free trade agreement with the EU in 2010. Tymoshenko is the only candidate who includes in her election program the need for Ukraine to Europeanize domestically as a prelude to integration into the EU. This stance clearly represents an understanding of the link between domestic and foreign policies that has always been absent under all three Ukrainian presidents.

The Batkivshchyna Party that Tymoshenko leads is the most active Ukrainian party in the European parliament and a member of the European People's Party, the largest political group in the parliament, which clearly supports her candidacy. Yushchenko is effectively persona non grata in the European People's Party, where Our Ukraine is a passive member while Yanukovich's Party of Regions has a cooperation agreement with Vladimir Putin's United

Russia Party – but not with any political group in the European Parliament.

Under President Tymoshenko, NATO membership could come off the backburner and an EU membership offer is possible. Tymoshenko – unlike any other candidate – understands the Western European demand for Ukraine to undertake integration into Europe while seeking to maintain good relations with Russia, especially over the need to avoid gas crises.

Under President Yanukovich, NATO membership would be forever dead and buried and cooperation with NATO would be reduced. The EU would not see him as a genuine partner as his party has been passive towards Ukraine's European integration.

In the presidential elections, Ukrainian voters will be faced by a clear choice between two main candidates, a potential for change represented by Tymoshenko and continuation of the status quo-stagnation as represented by her opponent, Yanukovich. Despite the presence of American PR consultants, Yanukovich has not fundamentally changed in the last five years.

Positive voting for Tymoshenko, based on her record in government and her six positions outlined above, combined with the inevitable negative voting against Yanukovich in round two, will ensure the election of Tymoshenko as Ukraine's next president.

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