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IN THIS ISSUE

****Yatseniuk falters on the eve of Ukrainian election campaign**

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Yatseniuk's Presidential Election Campaign Stagnates

On October 1 the central election commission laid out the timetable for Ukraine's January 17, 2010 presidential elections. However, the candidate who began his campaign first –Arseny Yatseniuk– might already be in trouble before the registration of candidates begins on October 20. A poll published by Ukrayinska Pravda (October 8) showed Yatseniuk's popularity declining by a third to 8 percent since July, while the gap between Yulia Tymoshenko and himself has grown as her popularity has increased, currently standing at 19 percent.

Yatseniuk began his election campaign first and with a promising launch. After being ousted as parliamentary speaker on November 12, 2008 with the support of President Viktor Yushchenko and his chief of staff, Viktor Baloga, Yatseniuk's ratings dramatically increased to 10-12 percent, a few percentage points below Tymoshenko. He gained popularity from the widespread public disillusionment with quarrelling politicians and the onset of the global financial crisis.

In spring his popularity stopped growing, and he failed to capitalize on the collapse of the Party of Regions-Tymoshenko bloc (BYuT) coalition negotiations on June 7. Moreover, his campaign replaced Ukrainian political consultants (whose leaders were from the presidential secretariat), with odious Russian political technologists who had worked for Viktor Yanukovych's 2004 election campaign where they were involved in propaganda directed at Yushchenko.

Yatseniuk is the only leading candidate who is using Russian political technologists and, as Aylona Getmanchuk, the editor of the weekly magazine Glavred has observed, only Yatseniuk seems to believe they are good for his campaign. Getmanchuk quoted a participant in the Yalta European Strategy (YES) summit on September 26-27 as saying: "It is time to pass on to Yatseniuk that he should throw those Russians out" (www.glavred.info, September 28). YES was established as a pro-European lobby NGO by oligarch Viktor Pinchuk (www.yes-ukraine.org). European Council on Foreign Relations Senior Fellow Andrew Wilson noted that the YES annual summit is the closest event Ukraine has to Russia's Valdai to promote its image (Kyiv Post, October 1).

Over the last four months Yatseniuk's election campaign has slowly unraveled and seems to be in a process of stagnation. On September 7 Glavred was one of the first to notice this in an article entitled: "The star that is falling." Yatseniuk's support is "soft" based on disillusionment against other politicians, rather than on any clear backing for him. Yatseniuk's support is regionally based in Western Ukraine and popular among voters with higher education. Many of these are former Yushchenko voters who also dislike Tymoshenko. By

contrast, the two leading candidates, Tymoshenko and Yanukovych, have strong support bases for their campaigns.

On the issue of future NATO membership, Yatseniuk has reversed his stance. In the January 2008 letter to NATO seeking a Membership Action Plan co-signed by Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, only Yatseniuk has since removed his name. Tymoshenko has agreed to Our Ukraine's demands for their support of her candidacy that includes backing NATO membership (www.dt.ua., September 19).

At the YES summit Yatseniuk confused European politicians about his views on European integration, and adopted the Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovych position that integration into the E.U. is in the hands of Brussels (not Kyiv). Yatseniuk disillusioned Ukrainian voters (who watched the candidates live on ICTV) and European politicians by the shallowness of his "pro-European" views.

Two journalists concluded after Yatseniuk's presentation that he has changed compared to the 2008 YES summit and that the "new" Yatseniuk had given the greatest "contradictory impressions" to those present. "This was not the politician who only a year ago could speak about the arrival of a new generation of politicians," Yatseniuk no longer spoke in a natural manner but as an "actor" speaking the "language of his billboards" (www.pravda.com.ua, September 28).

Yatseniuk proved unable to delineate his "ideology" and seemed to constantly shift his position. Indeed, his current position does not agree with the platform of Our Ukraine within which he was elected to parliament in September 2007 among its top five candidates. At the YES summit it remained unclear if he supported Ukraine's membership in the E.U. (www.pravda.com.ua, September 28).

Yatseniuk is proving to be neither different nor a change from establishment politicians, and is not proposing anything new to Ukrainian voters (Glavred, September 7). The youngest candidate is proving unable to establish a dialogue with voters because he is widely perceived as arrogant and elitist. This is a common problem for those individuals in Ukraine, and other post-Soviet states who made a lot of money quickly while they were young (Yatseniuk turned 35 in May, the legal minimum age to be a candidate). Yatseniuk has sought to overcome his distance from voters by traveling economy class to watch Shakhtiar Donetsk play soccer in Turkey, eating at fast food outlets that serve Ukrainian food and switching his expensive watch for a cheaper brand. These steps are scrutinized and ridiculed by the Ukrainian media as they do not fit the image of a person who drives a Bentley.

Yatseniuk's third place position in the polls is being strongly challenged by two other candidates –Anatoliy Grytsenko and Serhiy Tyhipko– whose popularity are growing. Grytsenko is a former defense minister and head of parliament's committee on national security and defense who headed the analytical-research department of Yushchenko's 2004 campaign. Tyhipko is from the Dnipropetrovsk clan and a former head of the National Bank who headed Yanukovych's 2004 election campaign.

Among the presidential candidates, Yatseniuk launched his campaign first and possibly prematurely. His position as the candidate of the "new, rising, younger generation" has failed to take root among Ukrainian voters and commentators, Europeans and Americans and his chances of entering the second round on February 7 look increasingly slim.

--Taras Kuzio
