



EURASIA DAILY MONITOR

**Volume 5 , Issue 66 (April 08, 2008)**

IS THE PARTY OF REGIONS SLIDING INTO CRISIS?

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The Party of Regions (Regions) should be riding high in Ukrainian polls as opposition parties traditionally have golden opportunities to increase their popularity. Instead, Regions and its leader and former Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych have been declining in popularity and are in a crisis. On March 6 Regions lost 6 mayoral elections in eastern Ukraine to local independents and the Yuliya Tymoshenko bloc (BYuT).

President Viktor Yushchenko has only led in the polls in 2005. Since 2006 Yushchenko has been in third place behind Viktor Yanukovych and Tymoshenko respectfully. Yushchenko's ratings temporarily increased to second place after he dissolved parliament in April 2007.

Regions is unlikely to change its leader ahead of the presidential elections as he remains popular with rank and file members in Donetsk and, more importantly, there is no popular and well known alternative. The paradox for Regions is that Yanukovych will be unable to win the elections standing against either Tymoshenko or a Yushchenko-Tymoshenko alliance. Regions therefore is looking favorably on an alliance with Yushchenko to block the election of Tymoshenko, who is seen as a threat to the status quo.

Coupled with a crisis in leadership, Regions has another problem it must deal with. Regions and Donetsk-Crimea voters exhibit the strongest tendency of all parties to vote negatively (23 percent). Only 12.2 percent of western Ukrainian and 27.4 percent of central Ukrainians vote. In Donetsk and Crimea, two Regions strongholds, a striking 42.8 percent and 73 percent, respectively, vote negatively.

Some 33 percent of voters in Donetsk vote for Regions because they like the party and its leader, while an equal amount (33 percent) vote to block others (i.e., orange forces) from coming to power. A proportion of Regions voters are therefore susceptible to changing their vote if an orange political force can reach out to them and change their negative "nationalist" and "anti-Russian" stereotype.

Tymoshenko and BYuT have been more successful than Yushchenko and Our Ukraine in breaking down this stereotype and attracting "soft" Regions voters; and, in

doing so, Tymoshenko and BYuT have for the first time reached first place in popularity. A February poll gave BYuT 30 percent support, similar to its 2007 election result, compared with 23 percent for Regions, a drop of 11 percent from its 2007 result.

Four factors have led to a decline in popularity for Yanukovich and Regions.

Firstly, weak intellectual resources and a paucity of intellectuals. Kyiv's think tanks continue to remain pro-orange in a city that has always had national democratic sympathies and where today BYuT is the most popular with 72 percent support. Tymoshenko will head the BYuT list on the May 26 Kyiv city council elections, ensuring its first place victory. Kyiv's best-known think tank, the Ukrainian Center for Economic and Political Studies ("Razumov Center"), was the intellectual nerve center for Yushchenko's 2004 campaign, while Regions is poorly represented among scholars at conferences and press conferences inside and outside Ukraine.

Secondly, issues. Regions has chosen to focus on issues that are not a priority among its voters. Regions' ostensible reason for blockading parliament was to oppose the January letter to NATO from three senior Ukrainian officials seeking a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at NATO's Bucharest summit.

NATO membership is not a priority, though, for voters as a whole. Only 0.8 percent of voters in Donetsk (compared with a Ukraine-wide average of 4.4 percent) considered it important, and it was second to last in a list of thirty-four priorities. In Ukraine, as in most countries, foreign affairs is not a high priority for voters, who vote on "bread and butter" issues.

Similarly, another issue that Regions has focused on is the Russian language question, which ranks only nineteenth out of the thirty-four issues. Only the Regions strongholds expressed a relatively high priority for tackling this question.

Thirdly, poor tactics. Blockading parliament was unpopular among voters in general; only 19 percent of Regions voters supported the strategy. Senior Regions member Andriy Kliuev nevertheless claimed that "blocking [parliament's] tribune was a reflection of the real sentiments of our voters rather than an outcome of party propaganda."

As Ihor Zhdanov, a Ukraine consultant, pointed out, Regions' aim in blockading parliament had nothing to do with its declared opposition to NATO membership. In reality, it aimed at disintegrating the orange coalition, which had a slim majority, and replacing it with a grand coalition. Yushchenko and Kolesnikov agreed on establishing a post-election grand coalition in May 2007 as a compromise to the constitutional crisis that led to Regions' acquiescing in early elections.

Fourthly, image. Donetsk voters are turned off by the image of a 'loser'. Zhdanov pointed out that "in this region [Donetsk] they do not like those who lose" and the problem with Yanukovich is that he has lost twice, in 2004 and 2007. A third defeat in the next presidential elections could finish his political career.

The popularity of Yanukovych personally and Regions as a party are declining. Centrist parties in Ukraine have never had long lives as by their nature they are more fronts for business and regional interests than ideological parties. It is too early to tell whether Regions will go the way of other centrist parties or whether it will rebound from its crisis (Kyyivskyi Telegraf, March 21-27, Politychnyi Portret Ukrayiny, nos.37-38, 2007, Ukrayinska Pravda, February 19, March 25).

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