

TRENDS AND OPINION POLLS REVEAL SHIFTING VOTER PREFERENCES IN UKRAINE

By Taras Kuzio

Ukraine's parliamentary elections on September 30 are unlikely to bring overwhelming victories for either the "orange" camp of Our Ukraine-Self Defense and the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc or the "blue" camp of the Party of Regions. Ukraine's regional and linguistic divide makes such a landslide unlikely; instead, both camps will remain in the 45-55% range. Nevertheless, there are trends that do reflect changes in electoral geography and voter intentions.

Ukraine's regionalism means that no political force has country-wide support. Thus the winning side in a Ukrainian election is unable to put the other side out of business, making it impossible to institute an autocracy.

A narrow win for either camp precludes the formation of a huge parliamentary majority. In addition, the defeated camp will be in a position to establish a powerful opposition bloc with, at a minimum, 45% of the seats in parliament.

As thresholds make it more difficult for many parties to win seats in parliament, the political field has consolidated into a limited number of parties and blocs. Twenty parties and blocs are registered this year, down from 45 in 2006. Ukraine's 3% threshold for parties and blocs to enter parliament is the lowest in Europe and Eurasia. Nevertheless, it has not led to a large influx of small parties into parliament. Eight groups received seats in 1998, six groups in 2002, and only five last year.

Left-leaning parties, which dominated politics in the 1990s, have dwindled and only the Communist Party (KPU) is likely enter parliament this fall. The Socialist Party (SPU), won four

parliamentary elections between 1994–2006, but its current popularity stands at 1–2%. The KPU has fallen from 24.65% in the 1998 to 3.66% last year. Support for the far-left Progressive Socialist Party, which last won a seat 1998, has declined to less than 2%.

The 2007 elections are also changing Ukraine's electoral geography. The Yulia Tymoshenko bloc (BYuT), which came second in a majority of eastern and southern Ukrainian districts in 2006, is replacing the left as a viable alternative to the Party of Regions in these districts.

The Party of Regions will likely still take first place in eastern and southern Ukrainian districts, but by a smaller margin and therefore taking fewer seats than in last year's elections. BYuT is particularly growing in Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and even the Crimea. After Tymoshenko's rally in Kharkiv earlier this month, one poll gave BYuT a narrow lead over the Party of Regions in that key oblast.

Our Ukraine–Self Defense (NUNS) remains unable to break out of its western Ukrainian base, and polls show that it has barely improved on last year's poor performance of 14%.

The Party of Regions leads in all polls, but this does not guarantee that it will head a majority coalition and government. Three out of four recent polls show the two orange forces beating the Party of Regions. Still-undecided voters tend to be from the orange camp and they could still improve orange results.

Polls show a narrowing gap between the Party of Regions and BYuT, which finished first and second last year, respectively. The Kyiv-based Concorde Capital reported that the Party of Regions has 26–28% and BYuT 20–26%. The gap between them last year was 10% and is now narrowing to 5–7%. A poll by the T. Shevchenko Political and Sociological Institute gave only a 1% lead to the Party of Regions over BYuT. Therefore, Ukrainian analysts believe Yulia Tymoshenko is poised to head of the next government.

Polls show that three political forces will enter parliament: Party of Regions, NUNS, and BYuT. They may be joined by the KPU and former speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn's bloc.

But should a fifth political force enter parliament it would prevent the Party of Regions from increasing from its current 186 seats to half of the seats (225) available. It would be in the Party of Regions' interest for fewer parties and blocs to enter parliament, leaving more seats to be distributed via the proportional system.

The Lytvyn bloc and BYuT are likely to pick up disaffected SPU voters in central Ukraine. The SPU has lost voters after it defected from the orange camp in summer 2006 and joined the Party of Regions and KPU in the Anti-Crisis coalition and the government of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych.

After the 2006 elections the SPU held a swing vote, enabling the creation of a coalition not dominated by the orange (Our Ukraine, BYuT) or blue (Party of Regions, KPU) camps.

The Lytvyn bloc could again be the spoiler this year. The bloc's allegiances remain unclear. Lytvyn was head of the presidential administration from 1999–2002 and headed the pro-Leonid Kuchma "For a United Ukraine bloc" in 2002. During the 2004 elections and Orange Revolution Lytvyn sat on the fence and maintained good relations with both the orange and blue camps. As speaker, Lytvyn kept parliament open and facilitated the motion that declared Yanukovych the winner. While President Viktor Yushchenko and his business allies have always had good relations with Lytvyn, relations with BYuT are poor. Therefore, the Lytvyn bloc could be courted by both the Party of Regions and NUNS.

This year's elections are likely to give the orange camp its second slim majority. Time will tell if they again fail to use it, as they did last year.

(Kyiv Post, July 12, August 23; Kyiv Weekly, July 26–August 8; bbc.co.uk/Ukrainian, August 3; *Ukrayinska pravda*, August 27, 28, September 3, 9, 12; tymoshenko.com.ua, August 16)