

Opinion: Ukraine's Orange Revolution has grayed

With elections set for Jan. 17, Ukrainians have as little hope as ever in democracy.



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WASHINGTON — On Jan. 17, Ukrainians will vote in their least promising presidential elections since the Orange Revolution brought Viktor Yushchenko to power five years ago. Amid failed reform efforts and endless domestic political squabbles, Ukrainians are losing faith not only in their leaders, but in democracy itself.

Several International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) surveys show that the majority of Ukrainians now have little or no confidence in any leading politician, and that all the major presidential contenders suffer from net negative perception ratings.

In January 2005, Orange became one of Europe's largest protest movements since World War II, heralding the dawn of a new democratic era in Ukraine, and stirring hopes in the West that the country could become a shining example of economic and political reform among former Soviet republics. Today, the Orange coalition's pro-Western candidates are trailing badly in the polls. President Yushchenko's popularity has slumped to single digits and his negative rating is over 80 percent, making it seemingly impossible for him to win a second term.

Orange's other leader, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, remains a polarizing figure, and while observers expect her to advance to the second round in the election, she faces strong headwinds in winning the presidency. Meanwhile, in an almost complete reversal, the pro-Russian coalition headed by Viktor Yanukovich, who lost to Yushchenko five years ago — and whose stiff style and substance have changed little since — has become the undisputed front-runner.

What went wrong with the Orange Revolution?

At the most basic level, the Orange coalition, beginning with Yushchenko himself, failed to fulfill its primary mandate of fighting the country's endemic corruption and reducing the influence of oligarchs. The coalition never managed to separate business and politics, and more importantly never enacted reforms to bring about greater transparency. Ukraine's international annual ranking on Transparency International's annual corruption index improved slightly in 2005, when the government made some progress in stemming corruption by taking actions such as closing free trade zones used as loopholes for tax dodging and halting abuse of VAT refunds. But by 2007, these gains had been reversed, and today corruption in Ukraine is no better, and in some cases worse, than it was under Yushchenko's predecessor, Leonid Kuchma.

Compounding this lack of action on corruption is the poisonous political conflict that has played out between President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Tymoshenko over most of the past five years. In-fighting over annual gas contracts has led to votes of no-confidence in two governments, provided Russia with the ability to play off Ukraine's leaders and badly damaged Ukraine's image in the European Union as a country unable to guarantee the transit of gas in winter. The clash between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko

has fragmented the Orange camp, resulting in a prolonged period of ineffective governance, for which the coalition now stands to pay at the ballot box.

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The ongoing battles between the president and prime minister have produced political instability, forcing the country to hold two parliamentary elections in only three years, with the threat of a third election narrowly averted. The in-fighting has also resulted in shifting, short-lived alliances and back-room dealings that serve the interests of political leaders rather than the Ukrainian people.

While Ukraine has progressed in some areas, such as holding free elections and media pluralism, these gains have been undermined by low public trust in state institutions. The Ukrainian people's confidence in their political system is now as low as Yushchenko's ratings.

Six IFES surveys conducted in Ukraine over the past five years indicate that public disillusionment has grown as corruption has continued unabated and political elites have left important national issues unattended.

Even if Tymoshenko were to win the second round of the presidential election, the majority of the population would still disapprove of her, and she would have little or no mandate to govern — hardly a recipe for sweeping reforms.

Since the Orange Revolution, Ukraine has become a tragic case of missed opportunities. Five years ago, the country had a chance to break free of corruption and oligarchic domination, consolidate its democratic gains, and show that former Soviet states can enjoy liberal government. Today, that dream is more distant. Ordinarily, free and fair elections afford people new hope. On the eve of these presidential elections, most Ukrainians have no trust that their leaders are willing or able to take steps toward major reforms, and even worse, they equate democracy with chaos. There still exists a significant constituency in Ukraine for these reforms, but they await leadership that can make this change possible.

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