

Opinion: Ukraine should turn west to move forward

When Ukraine voters go to the polls on Sunday, they should stay true to the Orange Revolution.



By Taras Kuzio — Special to GlobalPost

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KIEV, Ukraine — The mass protests of the 2004 Orange Revolution were about democracy, corruption, rule of law and national identity, far more than they were about a battle between East and West.

But the choice Ukrainians face on Sunday, when they vote in the [second round of the presidential race](#), can be seen as one giant geopolitical tug.

Under the watchful eye of hundreds of international observers, Ukrainians will vote Feb. 7 between Yulia Tymoshenko with her European-style democracy, and Viktor Yanukovich, who was twice convicted for violent robbery, refuses to accept responsibility for massive election fraud in 2004 and thinks a woman's place is in the kitchen — not the president's office.

The forward-looking choice is clear, and its not in the direction of Russia.

Vowing to bring Ukraine closer to Russia, Yanukovich is ideologically and intellectually incapable of facilitating the social, economic and political reforms Ukraine so badly needs. And while his election billboards have touted populist promises, these would come at a price to the economy and relations with the International Monetary Fund while continuing to enrich a small cabal of oligarchs.

Yanukovich's support for Russian as a state language could be a recipe for regional and inter-ethnic instability. Language issues, as Canadians know all too well, need to be treated with extreme caution.

Yanukovich's policies could threaten to curb progress made in strengthening the Ukrainian language and culture as well as Ukraine's sense of national identity, issues that remain dear to the Ukrainian diaspora in the United States and Canada.

What Ukraine needs is the clear-cut and predictable application of the rule of law underpinned by a strong, independent judiciary. The Orange Revolution clarion call "bandits to prison" must translate into elites being held accountable for their crimes.

Ultimately, reforms can only be undertaken through a combination of a strong-willed leader and support from the EU. The same held true for weak reformers in eastern Europe such as Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. Of the two candidates, only Tymoshenko could hope to reset relations with Brussels after years of Ukraine fatigue.

Reviving relations with Europe

Tymoshenko remains the best choice. Her vision for Ukraine is unashamedly European and forward-looking in contrast to the nostalgic conservatism of Yanukovich.

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Her government pushed through Ukraine's entry into the World Trade Organization and this year will conclude a Free Trade Agreement with the EU. She is a familiar face in Brussels — the Fatherland party that Tymoshenko leads is a member of the European People's Party, the largest continent-wide party.

Yanukovich's party is affiliated with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's autocratic United Russia party which, together with the Russian media, has been endorsing him as the only candidate with whom they can do business. Under a Yanukovich presidency, Ukraine's relations with the EU will play second fiddle to membership in a Moscow-led customs union. Ukraine's long-standing security cooperation with NATO would stagnate.

As president, Yanukovich would be the only European head of state to recognize the independence of the Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, opening a Pandora's box for Crimea to detach itself from Ukraine. Tymoshenko followed the EU and international community in supporting Georgia's territorial integrity.

Tymoshenko has sought to stabilize energy relations with Russia, which has earned her praise in Brussels from those who fear winter gas crises. Tymoshenko combines an ideological orientation toward Europe with pragmatism toward the East that Brussels has long pushed for. She has courted EU investment in Ukraine's gas transportation system, through which 80 percent of Russian gas flows to Europe and which has long been a strategic asset sought by Moscow.

Energy lies at the heart of corruption in Ukrainian politics and Ukraine's relations with Russia.

Tymoshenko's removal of the opaque gas intermediary RosUkrEnergo has taken billions of dollars of sloop money out of Ukrainian politics. Alarming, Yanukovich wishes to reopen the terms of the gas deal with Russia and bring back gas intermediaries.

Ukraine's choice

In the first round of voting on Jan. 17, two-thirds of the votes were for democratic candidates, evidence that the democratic values of the Orange Revolution endure. On Feb. 7, Tymoshenko appears the best hope for Ukraine to continue along her democratic path and combat corruption. On Sunday Ukrainians are faced by a stark choice between democracy or counter-revolutionary revenge and Soviet nostalgia.

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