

Political Apathy: A Curable Malady for Ukraine?

Written by Paul Pryce

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PAUL PRYCE, NOV 1 2011

On February 14th, 2010, following a run-off vote in Ukraine's fifth post-independence presidential election, Viktor Yanukovich was declared the victor and the president-elect. In the months following this development in the political landscape of Ukraine, numerous reforms have been adopted that have drawn the ire of both the international community and some groups within Ukraine itself. For example, following the presidential elections and the subsequent difficulty for opposition candidate Yulia Tymoshenko to form a coalition in parliament, a new government was formed in the Verkhovna Rada. This government, it is reported, is composed of the largest Cabinet of any European state, with 29 Ministers appointed to serve in this central capacity. However, of the 29 Ministers appointed, there is not a single female parliamentarian.[1] Remarks made by the head of this Cabinet, newly appointed Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, have "enraged feminist groups by suggesting that women are unsuitable for high political office and incapable of carrying out reforms." [2]

Regardless of what effect this new government has on the status of women's rights in Ukraine or the state's foreign policy, the election itself and the events that led to the formation of a new government in the Verkhovna Rada reflect emerging trends in Ukraine's post-Soviet political development that could pose significant risks to the stability of the democratic model in place there. In order to explore possible solutions to the increasing level of instability, it will be necessary to examine in detail the events surrounding the February 14th declaration of Yanukovich's victory and the particular trends these events reflect.

Even in the early stages of the presidential election campaign, several of the candidates for this public office began levelling accusations against their opponents, suggesting that these opponents might be preparing large scale attempts at vote rigging. In early January 2010, "Tymoshenko alleged that Yanukovich's Party of the Regions was organizing mass fraud in the east of the country..." [3] Further to this, even as Tymoshenko withdrew her appeal to the High Administrative Court on the election results, she insisted on refusing to formally recognize Yanukovich as the new president and even went so far as to claim, in a televised address, "that Yanukovich is seeking to establish an anti-Ukrainian dictatorship." [4]

It is important to note, though, that Tymoshenko and her supporters were not alone in making such public accusations regarding the reliability of the election results. The incumbent candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, formerly an ally of Tymoshenko's during the so-called "Orange Revolution" of 2004, suggested that "the highest threat of falsification in the first round will proceed from the Bloc for Yulia Tymoshenko." [5] Similarly, Yanukovich touted accusations that Tymoshenko and her supporters would seek to apply an unethical influence on the election results in order to avoid defeat in the presidential run-off. [6] With the incumbent candidate as well as the two front-runners of the election playing on fears that the election fraud that permeated the first two rounds of the 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine would be repeated in 2010, it is understandable that the public confidence in the integrity of the democratic process should be adversely affected to some degree.

A joint poll conducted by the domestic NGOs Democratic Initiatives and the Ukrainian Sociology Service some weeks prior to the election found that only 4.5% of respondents believed that the vote would be fair while 41.4% believed that the election results would be manipulated and 15.7% expressed certainty that the manipulation of the vote would be so profuse as to render the results drastically removed from the authentic political will of the electorate. [7] International observers noted the substantial effect these accusations had on the political atmosphere

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of the country as well. In its final report on the vote, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) elections watchdog, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) remarked that "unsubstantiated allegations of large-scale election fraud negatively affected the election atmosphere and voter confidence in the process."^[8]

These reports from both domestic and international observers on the state of public confidence in the democratic process in Ukraine indicates not only the effect Ukrainian politicians can have in influencing perceptions about the legitimacy of certain state institutions – such as the administrative capacity of the Central Election Commission to guarantee free and fair elections – but also the public sentiment that power elites have not been sufficiently capable of rendering the expected level of government services while serving in public office. This power elite, made up of long-time Ukrainian politicians, is not to be understood here in the Marxist sense, referring to a bourgeoisie that has secured the means of production for itself in the period of privatization and the adoption of Western-inspired economic reforms that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Rather, by referring to a "power elite", the intent is to concisely indicate either those Ukrainian politicians who have demonstrated a tenacious ability to remain close to the core decision-making processes in the governance of their country or possess some perceived degree of charisma that induces audiences – the electorate, namely – to accept the veritable "speech acts" of such political leaders as normative rules in that political culture.

With regard to the first type of political leader that might be defined as part of the Ukrainian power elite, one might refer to the example of Mykola Azarov. While his remarks on the role of women in Ukrainian politics drew much ire from the public, as was previously mentioned, Azarov has remained consistently involved in the high-level decision-making processes of the national government. Aside from currently serving as Prime Minister, he previously served as Prime Minister from late 2004 until early 2005, also serving as the Finance Minister from 2002 until the end of his first, albeit brief, term as Prime Minister.^[9] Meanwhile, in the case of the second type of political leader which might be defined as belonging to the power elite, an example worth noting is the former Prime Minister and presidential candidate Yulia Tymoshenko. In material promoting its political standpoint to international audiences, the Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko itself uses the term "charismatic leader" to describe Tymoshenko.^[10] So profuse is the perception that Tymoshenko possesses a considerable degree of influence over public opinion by virtue of her personal charisma that some observers have put forward the notion that a victory for Tymoshenko in the 2010 presidential elections could very well have been detrimental for the fragile system of checks and balances in Ukraine's democratic system, as she might have been inclined toward the concentration of power within the presidency.^[11]

While the bases for including particular political personalities under the umbrella of the Ukrainian power elite differs, one similarity that these political leaders hold in common, aside from the capacity to influence the development of social constructs in Ukraine and the prerogative to develop government policy, is the lack of public confidence in this elite. It could be said that public confidence in the capacity of the current political elite in Ukraine was already quite low even before the public bore witness to the unfolding drama of the 2010 presidential elections and its immediate aftermath. It has been observed by some scholars that, in the midst of Ukraine's re-assertion of independence from the crumbling Soviet Union, "the leaders were not in control of the processes of state formation. Actually, it was the process itself that determined the actions and perceptions of the leaders."^[12] Some authors have suggested that the drive for independence and national re-awakening even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union represented a significant shift in the political culture of Ukraine by generating renewed vitality to the political discourse of the country and that this "political discourse created an ideological background for the nationalist movements and signified the creation of a new national elite."^[13] Whether this was the case and instances of "carry over" – that is to say, political leaders who previously supported the Soviet regime maintaining power and influence through the period of transition and beyond – were the exception and not the rule per se, it appears that the Ukrainian public and some international observers regard the thinking of the power elite and its approaches to contemporary societal problems as dated and inadequate.

Additionally, there appears to be the perspective that Ukrainian political leaders, regardless of their perceived level of competence, do not hold as their principal motivation the best interests of the electorate. This view that political elites in Ukraine are not chiefly concerned with the public interest but by personal interests is further reinforced by the close

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connections many members of this intelligentsia have with political and business leaders in the neighbouring Russian Federation. In Ukraine and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, “members of the political elite in these countries continued to cultivate personal ties with former party and economic leaders in Moscow”[14] and have been observed to continue to do so well after the re-assertion of Ukrainian independence.

This latter basis for a lack of confidence in the capacity of the power elite to promote the best policy outcomes proves to be the most compelling argument for the widespread political apathy in Ukraine at present. It is, after all, not necessarily the integrity of the democratic process that is lacking in the country as international observers reported no irregularities with the voting procedure in the recent presidential elections. “Although formal democratic institutions and procedures were adopted, elite power games marred the quality of democratic politics.”[15] Thus, even with the institutions in place to facilitate a vibrant and stable democracy, the disputes amongst the political elites of the country present the crux of the threat to that same democracy and all of the development that has been achieved in the two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The disputes between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko following the Orange Revolution, in this light, have been just as detrimental for the democratic process as the unfounded allegations of election fraud exchanged by the frontrunner candidates.

Ukrainian democracy has been bound up in a Gordian knot, the strands of which are “slow institutionalization, a political society restricted to elites with mostly weak party base, self-restrained intra-elite power struggles, [and] the loss of confidence in the elites on the part of the citizenry...”[16] The dilemma of finding a means to untie this knot could very well be essential to the success of the state-building project in Ukraine. After all, with voters feeling increasingly alienated by the presidential candidates and their intra-elite power struggles, viewing the integrity of the election administration and the voting procedure itself as suspect, it is entirely likely that a deepening of this political apathy over additional election cycles could lead some communities to seek alternative means of advocating their political interests. Indeed, in a state that encompasses such a large swathe of territory, home to myriad ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, and experiencing some consistent economic hardship, Ukraine finds itself at heightened risk of political terrorism by non-state actors unless public confidence in the state and its institutions is maintained rigorously.

If the current political situation indicates that state legitimacy is being jeopardized, it is necessary to examine how this threat might be removed or at least dissipated through an adjustment in the behaviour of the power elite. On the surface, it would appear to be a simple prospect to eliminate the exacerbating factors. As has already been discussed, one of the most compelling bases for the increasing level of political apathy in Ukraine is the prevalence of intra-elite power struggles. Therefore, it would stand to reason that the most relevant solution would be for political elites to conduct any power struggles or election campaigns on the basis of ideological differences or on so-called “wedge issues” with regard to government policy. The concept of wedge issues is one that has taken on considerable importance in political communications, and therefore political culture, in the United States of America from the middle of the 20th century and onwards. Selecting a wedge issue for a political campaign can be a proposition with very high risks attached for the politician in question. “Staking a position on an issue might win over some voters, but it also has the potential to alienate voters who disagree...”[17]

To a degree, some Ukrainian political elites have sought to use wedge issues as a means of political campaigning. For example, there were attempts by Tymoshenko and Yanukovich in the lead-up to the 2010 presidential election to use the status of the Russian language in Ukraine as a political issue around which to mobilize their respective regional bases of support.[18] However, the status of the Russian language was not a viable issue over which Yushchenko and Tymoshenko could frame their own power struggles as their own positions on the issue were not tangibly different and their respective bases of support were drawn from similarly situated regions of the country – namely those where the Russian language is not as widely spoken and support for Ukrainian as the sole language of government is quite high. This indicates one of the possible reasons why political elites seek to utilize personal attacks so profusely in Ukrainian politics. Ukrainian political culture finds itself strongly disposed towards communitarianism and a closely associated kind of ethno-linguistic nationalism.

The importance placed on ethnic identity and various orthodoxies that have arisen in association with it, such as the assumption that the Ukrainian language requires zealous protection in order to maintain its vigour as a language of

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daily-use in most, if not all, regions of the country means that those candidates seeking to appeal to a wide base of support in election campaigns on the federal level have very little room for flexibility in finding wedge issues. "On a mass level, ethnic identity provides a surrogate for the broken ties of erstwhile Soviet communitarianism..."[19] As a result, political leaders are motivated to actively support communitarian ideals, appealing to social institutions and elements that are associated with the Ukrainian nation rather than pursuing liberalist ideals and values that promote the individual over this structured vision of community. Even Yanukovich and the Party of Regions, while seen as being more sceptical toward Ukrainian ethnic nationalism, are still generally bound to communitarianism in political communications. The principal difference between Yanukovich and his second-round opponent in the 2010 presidential elections, Tymoshenko, was that the social institutions he most actively promoted were those associated not with the Ukrainian ethnic nation but the Russian ethnic nation within Ukraine.

This prevalence of communitarianism, of one kind or another, in contemporary Ukrainian politics sets out worrying prospects for the democratic process in the country. Communitarians "do not believe that social unity can be sustained by such a weak bond as shared principles of justice... and fear that the balance between diversity and unity has been lost." [20] Therefore, a shift in the political culture of Ukraine seems to be unlikely as the post-Soviet period will ensure that communitarian sentiments are held strongly both by the power elite and by the electorate itself. So long as these sentiments ensure that political arguments must support and strengthen the ethnic community while personally disparaging political opponents, the downward spiral of apathy will continue. Were political leaders and the electorate to find themselves better disposed toward notions of civic nationalism and the debate over civic values and state models – for example, the welfare states of Western Europe or a more liberalized "night watchman" state – a greater sense of social cohesion across Ukraine might be fostered, as well as creating a political environment where the power elite would have no shortage of wedge issues on which to conduct their election campaigns in the future.

It remains to be seen as to just how the level of apathy might be reduced and how a greater degree of the Ukrainian populace might be engaged in the political process. If voters continue to be left disenfranchised by the election campaigns of the country, viewing the efforts of power elites as suspicious and self-motivated, then it stands to reason that more destructive expressions of political conflict will eventually manifest. There remains some potential for a shift in behaviour on the part of power elites in the near future, with the end of the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich. In the interim, ethnic and linguistic nationalism might very well remain high on the political agenda as it is an issue on which Yanukovich and Tymoshenko can readily adopt opposing stances. However, following Yanukovich's presidency, there might yet be some prospect for a change in the political culture that will present a more accommodating atmosphere toward key principles of civic nationalism, fostering a shift from the communitarianism of the early post-Soviet period. This shift could very well be crucial to the continuing stability and future prosperity of Ukraine.

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