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Constructing the ‘party of power’ in Ukraine

On 16 August, the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Strong Ukraine party, Serhiy Tyhipko, together with the Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, announced that his party would join the ruling Party of Regions. This merger of both parties before next year's parliamentary elections will strengthen the ruling camp in both central and eastern Ukraine. In the near future we may expect a further expansion by the Party of Regions at the expense of smaller groups.

Tyhipko, a former deputy prime minister for economic affairs in two cabinets at the end of the 1990s, and a former head of the National Bank of Ukraine, came to prominence as an advocate of pro-market reform and a self-styled representative of the middle class. He came third in the 2010 presidential election, with 13% of the votes. Tyhipko explained the merger with the Party of Regions in terms of the need to consolidate all the country’s constructive political forces, and the Party of Regions’ willingness to undertake reforms. The decision has not been unanimously accepted by his party’s deputies or the regional party leaders. The final resolution on this matter will be taken at the party congress, which will be held in a few months.

Tyhipko’s decision was most likely motivated by his personal political ambitions. Support for the Deputy Prime Minister and his group had been falling consistently, as after their entry into government, he had lost his image in voters’ eyes as an independent politician, and he has been saddled with the responsibility for unpopular economic reforms. The merger with the Party of Regions could offer him a good place on the party's electoral lists and increase his chances of maintaining a high position in government after the next elections. The changes to the electoral law, which should be implemented before next year’s elections and which are based on raising the electoral threshold from 3 to 5%, will encourage other small parties to join the Party of Regions and, consequently, the consolidation of the ‘party of power’. <tiw>