

Public feeling in Ukraine ahead of the parliamentary election

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After two and a half years under President Viktor Yanukovich and the Party of Regions, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians are dissatisfied with the state the country's economy is currently in and the direction it has been developing in. There has also been a significant drop in stability and social security with the general public increasingly feeling that the government has little interest in their problems. Only 16% of Ukrainians believe that the current government has performed better than their predecessors, although overall confidence in both the ruling party and the opposition remains low. Nonetheless, falling support for the president and the Cabinet does not seem to have translated into greater popularity for the country's opposition parties; these currently enjoy the confidence of only a quarter of the electorate. The clear lack of credibility for politicians on either side of the political spectrum, coupled with an almost universal preoccupation with the bare necessities of life, has shifted the political processes in Ukraine further down the agenda for the majority of Ukrainians.

Ukraine's poor economic performance, which over the last two years has been addressed through a series of highly unpopular economic reforms, has resulted in a growing mood of discontent and increased civil activity, with the Ukrainian people reporting a greater willingness than ever to join protests on social issues. Most of them, however, have shown much less interest in political rallies. This is likely to stem from low levels of trust in the opposition and the general belief that opposition politicians are not a viable alternative to the current government. One may therefore assume that there will be little public scrutiny of the parliamentary election scheduled for 28 October, and that the likelihood of mass demonstrations during it is low. However, in the event of large-scale vote rigging and a dismissive response from the government, spontaneous unsanctioned rallies cannot be ruled out. What is more likely, however, is a series of protests after the elections, when the already difficult economic situation is further exacerbated by a predicted rise in the price of gas for Ukrainian households and a possible move to devalue the Ukrainian hryvnia.

Opinion polls¹ in Ukraine suggest that over the last two years the general mood of the Ukrainian people has soured (see Appendix 1). Only 6% of respondents believe that the situation in the country has improved, with 66% reporting a change for the worse². The negative trend has continued throughout 2012. Currently, 75% of the Ukrainian people believe that

¹ The figures cited in the article come mainly from the most reliable Ukrainian public opinion research companies: the Razumkov Centre and the Kiev International Institute of Sociology. Their websites, however, do not provide figures that would enable a long-term analysis of the mood of the Ukrainian people regarding all the areas covered in this commentary (e.g. the mood of protest or the level of trust in the opposition). What is more, the reliability of the data available is compromised by a relatively high rate of refusal to take part in the polls (probably around 30%), which negatively affects their representativeness. It should also be stressed that the refusal rate is rarely reported by the research companies.

² See: http://www.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/news.php?news_id=386. The rate at which the public mood has been darkening is higher than during the presidency of both Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko.

the country's economy is performing badly (with only 2% claiming the opposite), and just 16% of those polled expect the situation to improve over the next 12 months³. Moreover, only 28% of respondents believe that the Ukrainian government is implementing reforms, and within that group, just 1% are of the opinion that the reforms have been successful. One of the main reasons for the harsh assessment of the recent changes in the country is the deteriorating state of the Ukrainian economy. Higher food and utility costs have been cited as a major concern by over half of Ukrainians. Securing economic means for survival has therefore become the main focus of Ukrainian society⁴. The top 14 places on the list of issues that the Ukrainian people expect their politicians to address most urgently are taken up by problems related to their financial situation⁵; in comparison, only 19% of them are concerned about the campaign of repression launched by the government against the opposition⁶. Consequently, issues such as the establishment of a dictatorship in the country, the loss of national sovereignty, and limits put on freedom of speech, are important to only 10% of Ukrainians⁷. This, in turn, means that Ukrainian society as a whole is less interested in closely monitoring the work of the government, which gives it more leeway in implementing changes in areas which do not directly affect the economic situation of the Ukrainian people, including a possible shift in foreign policy.

Ukrainian society vs. political class

Ukrainian society has little confidence in the state, in its main institutions and in its politicians, regardless of their political affiliations. None of the key state institutions, with the exception of the army, is trusted by more than 22% of the Ukrainian people⁸ (see Appendix 2). Although President Viktor Yanukovich enjoys the highest public confidence levels from among all politicians in the ruling camp, only 22% of respondents say they trust the president, while as many as 66% do not trust him. Yanukovich performs badly even in the east of the country, where both he and his Party of Regions have traditionally enjoyed the highest level of public confidence (only 30% of respondents in eastern Ukraine trust the president, while as many as 57% do not). Public support

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for the decisions taken by Yanukovich during his presidency has also been waning. Back in April 2010 – two months after Yanukovich took office – 37% of Ukrainians supported his policies; by December 2011 this figure had dropped to just 8%. A similar drop over the same period was observed in the public's support for both the government and parliament (see Appendix 3).

Over the last 12 months, the level of Ukrainian society's political alienation has also increased⁹. As many as 82% of Ukrainians believe that they have no real influence over what happens in the country, while over half of the respondents are uninterested in or irritated by the work of the government and the president. The polls also show that only 5% of respondents respect those in power, and as little as 3% are positively disposed towards the members of the ruling camp. Furthermore, the number of people who consider themselves to be happy has dropped for the first time in 10 years and for the first time under the rule of Viktor Yanukovich; the figure currently stands at 53% (down from 63% a year ago)¹⁰.

The negative assessment of the work of the ruling party has not, however, improved how Ukrainians view the opposition. Also this side of the political spectrum has been suffering from low levels of public trust, although their figures are slightly better than those of

³ See: Iryna Kyrychenko, *Задовольнятися чи бути задоволеним*, Дзеркало Тижня. Україна №20, 01.06.2012 http://dt.ua/SOCIETY/zadovolnyatisya_chi_buti_zadovolenimi-103105.html

⁴ See: Iryna Kyrychenko, *Маленький українець: довіра, побоювання, пріоритети*, Дзеркало Тижня. Україна, №12, 30.03.2012 http://dt.ua/SOCIETY/malenkiy_ukrayinets_dovira_poboyuvannya_prioriteti-99690.html

⁵ See: data published by the Razumkov Centre in June 2012, http://dif.org.ua/ua/polls/2012-year/vybory_parlament_reytingy_2_2012.htm. The data are particularly spectacular since the respondents were allowed to choose as many as 10 different answers.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See: Iryna Kyrychenko, *Маленький українець... оп. cit.*

⁸ See: research by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology from February 2012. <http://kiis.com.ua/ua/news/view-152.html>

⁹ See: http://www.gfk.ua/public_relations/press/press_articles/009771/index.ua.html for figures on the people's rejection of government (April 2012, GfK Ukraine).

¹⁰ See, for example, <http://kiis.com.ua/ua/news/view-149.html>

the president and the government. Polls suggest that 24% of the electorate trusts the opposition (while 53% do not), with somewhat better figures coming from western Ukraine (a difference of 5%). The overall support for opposition leaders has been growing, although the change has been quite slow¹¹. Public support for Yulia Tymoshenko, for example, increased between April 2010 and December 2011 from 14% to 15% (while support for one of the key opposition figures Arseny Yatsenyuk rose from 11% to 13% in the same period). The high level of distrust of Ukrainian politicians can be clearly seen from a survey which suggests that Ukrainians are more likely to trust a complete stranger than a politician¹². Meanwhile, Ukrainian society is most willing to trust institutions not linked to the government, and those that have no direct influence over the economic situation in the country. These include: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the media. These institutions are also the only ones that more people trust (62% and 40%, respectively) than distrust (17% and 28%, respectively).

This attitude to the Ukrainian political class means that the majority of the Ukrainian people believe that the upcoming parliamentary elections will not improve the situation in the country. This can be seen from the high number of respondents who remain undecided as to who to support (27%)¹³.

The growing lack of financial security and the rejection of the political class in Ukraine, have led to a situation where issues not directly related to the improvement of living standards are beginning to be of little concern to most voters. This attitude to public affairs,

¹¹ See, for example, http://www.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/news.php?news_id=386

¹² See: Iryna Kyrychenko, *Маленький українець...* *op. cit.*

¹³ See: <http://www.kiis.com.ua/ua/news/view-173.html>

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however, stems not only from Ukraine's economic hardship. The large-scale apathy affecting Ukrainian society is a result of the general disappointment with the country's political class over the last 20 years, and in particular the failure of the 2005-2009 'Orange' government. Broken election promises, the political chaos of Yulia Tymoshenko's premiership and permanent conflict with President Viktor

Yushchenko, as well as the subsequent defections of a number of the Orange Revolution leaders to Viktor Yanukovich's camp¹⁴ have resulted in a lack of interest in politics among the Ukrainian people, who have come to believe that politicians universally lack credibility and take decisions aimed at improving their own position. The current government, meanwhile, has not only failed to restore public confidence in the political class, but has gradually made matters worse. The growing hesitance among Ukrainian voters to take interest in those government policies which do not affect them personally but which are linked, for example, to issues of democracy or the modernisation of the state raises doubts about Ukrainian society's desire to actively monitor the autumn elections.

Potential for protest

2011 saw 2,277 demonstrations¹⁵ of various kinds in Ukraine – showing only a slight drop from the 2,305 rallies organised in 2010. In both years, most of the protests (60%) addressed socio-economic issues, and the majority of them were attended by fewer than 100 people. None of them could be defined as mass rallies, with the largest of them attracting a crowd of just 12,000 people (see Appendix 4). Political protests accounted for 25% of all rallies; many of them were organised in response to Yulia Tymoshenko's trial, and showed anger at central government. The figures show that only 1 in 20 protests was attended by more than 1,000 people (down from 1 in 12 in 2010). What is more, the number of

¹⁴ Incl. Vladislav Kaskiv, the head of Ukraine's State Agency for Investment and National Projects, who in 2004 chaired Ukraine's Pora movement (It's Time) and later helped lead the 'Orange Maidan' in Kiev. Also Petro Poroshenko, currently Ukraine's Minister for Trade and Economic Development, who previously served as the country's Foreign Minister

¹⁵ See: Centre for Society Research report, <http://www.cedoss.org.ua/protestmonitor/33-reports/118-e-zvit-2011-published>

demonstrations organised to protest against both political and social issues was low. This was related to the fact that political rallies in Ukraine rarely call for social change, while demonstrations focusing on the welfare of the general public seldom raise political slogans (with just 13% of events making combined demands). In addition, the lack of mixing of agendas stems from the general dislike which protesters have for opposition politicians. Consequently, the organisation of joint rallies or allowing politicians to participate in welfare protests could potentially compromise the cause in the eyes of both the rest of society and the government, who the demands are addressed to.

It therefore follows that the likelihood of achieving a cumulative effect, which could lead to large-scale protests across Ukraine, remains low. On the other hand, the largest rallies calling on the president and the government to give up power were not attended by politicians and were aimed at addressing mainly social and economic issues. Once under way, however, these demonstrations became more radicalised and began to make political demands as well. This was true of the best-known protests held in Ukraine over the past 2 years; all of them organised by particular social groups in response to individual projects proposed by the government. The largest of them was the so-called 'tax maidan', held in the

autumn of 2010, when over 10,000 local entrepreneurs protested against the provisions of a new tax code. The following year the biggest rallies were organised in March by teachers and local workers – with the former calling for higher wages and better welfare support, and the latter demanding changes to the new labour code. In the au-

Political rallies organised by the opposition and focused on short-lived calls for a change of power failed to attract much interest from the public.

tumn of 2011, veterans of the Afghan War took to the streets to voice their anger at a bill that proposed to strip them of their welfare benefits. Their protests culminated in September, with 10,000 people gathering outside the Verkhovna Rada in Kiev. During the same period, Ukraine saw a number of protests organised by Chernobyl victims, who opposed restrictions on their welfare benefits. All of the rallies were formed by groups of ordinary citizens, represented by trusted NGOs, and all of them had real leaders and a clear objective. Meanwhile, political rallies organised by the opposition focused on short-lived calls for a change of power and failed to attract much public support.

In the first 6 months of 2012, Ukraine saw only a few demonstrations, organised on a local level, and most of them were a continuation of last year's initiatives. This relative state of calm could be a result of pre-election promises made by the government at the beginning of the year and which has been actively promoted in the Ukrainian media ever since. These include the launch of social welfare programmes worth 16-25 billion hryvnia (2-3 billion USD), cheap mortgages, and a plan to pay 1,000 hryvnia in compensation to anyone who put down a deposit on a flat during Soviet times and did not receive accommodation. The number of political protests in the same period, particularly between May and July, increased. These rallies were organised mainly by Yulia Tymoshenko's party colleagues but failed to attract much interest from the public. The first week of July, meanwhile, saw a record number of demonstrations, caused predominantly by the passing of a controversial Language Bill by the Ukrainian parliament, which paved the way for the Russian-speaking minority to have their language recognised as an official language alongside Ukrainian in most of the country's regions. The presence of opposition politicians at these rallies suggested they intended to politicise the protests. The generally low turnout at the demonstrations (most of them were attended by no more than 100 people) showed both the reluctance of Ukrainian people to attend demonstrations with opposition politicians, as well as the general belief that the Bill was largely harmless¹⁶.

¹⁶ 65% of Ukrainian people welcome the decision to raise the official status of the Russian language, <http://kiis.com.ua/ua/news/view-179.html>. Meanwhile, the same number of respondents believe that the passing of the bill was an element of the ongoing election campaign http://www.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/news.php?news_id=400.

Outlook for the future

On the eve of the election campaign, there is significant potential for protests to break out in Ukraine. Just as in 2004, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians believe that the current situation in the country is bad and that measures taken by the government have been insufficient. More people are also stating that they are ready to take to the streets to fight for their rights, with those who wish to maintain social peace at all costs now becoming a minority. It should be stressed, however, that for a number of reasons the likelihood of large-scale political protests across Ukraine is rather low. First, parliamentary elections are far less likely to spark protests than a presidential ballot. Second, currently only 30% of respondents believe that the upcoming elections will change things for the better¹⁷. This stems mainly from the general disillusionment of Ukrainian people with politics. What can be currently observed in Ukraine is a strengthening of 'passive solidarity', whereby people are willing to support protests verbally but are unlikely to actively participate in demonstrations. It appears that the majority of Ukrainians no longer believe that protests are an effective instrument of change. Third, large-scale rallies are unlikely due to low support for the opposition and its key politicians, coupled with the lack of a strong leader – a figure similar to Viktor Yushchenko before

¹⁷ See results of a poll conducted by the Razumkov Centre in April 2012, <http://dif.org.ua/polls/2012-year/chem-oveckii-kupil-maibah.htm>

At the moment, the business plan is based on preliminary estimates and has no concrete financial evidence. Meanwhile, the continuing integration of energy markets across the European Union is forcing potential investors to make sound financial choices.

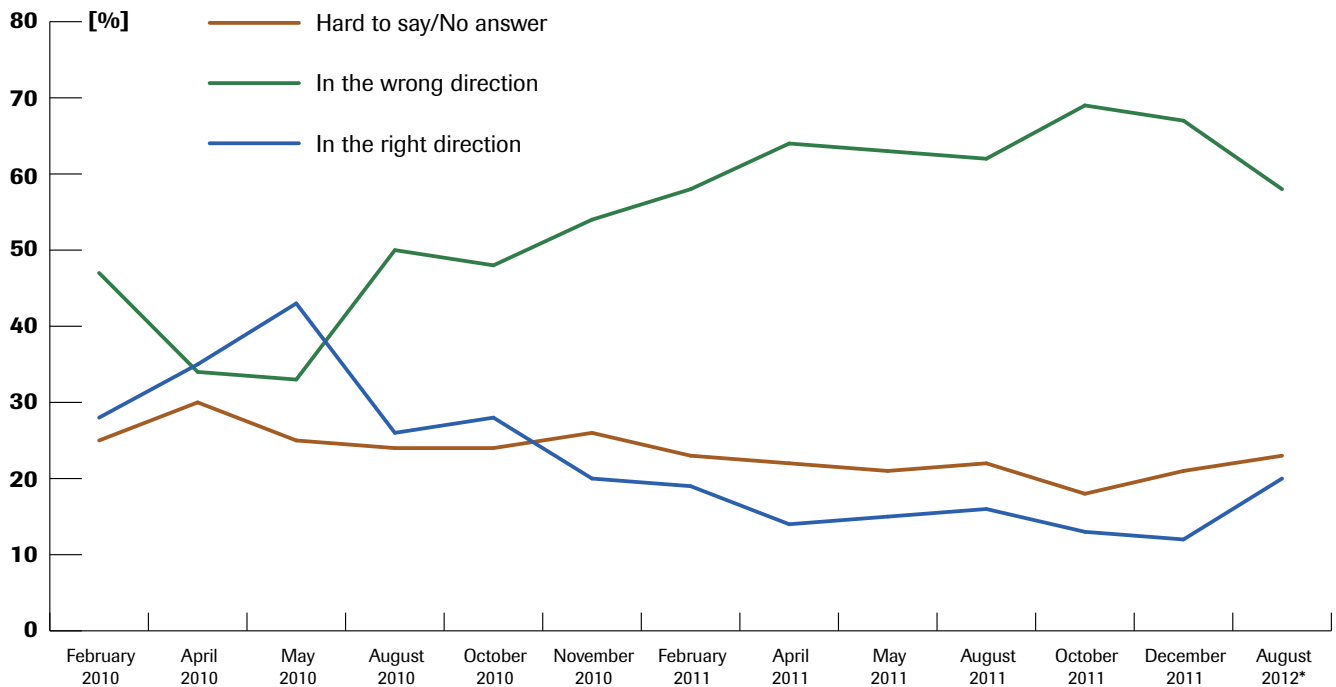
the Orange Revolution. This means that the Ukrainian opposition is not only unable to take advantage of the drop in support for the ruling party but is also incapable of channelling the growing discontent of the Ukrainian people towards the achievement of their own objectives. In effect, opposition politicians are not perceived as effective, credible leaders who have a clear vision for the country and who are capable of devising a means by which to achieve it.

Their failure to produce a clear manifesto

with a transparent programme of economic reform leading to concrete changes rules them out as a credible political alternative to the ruling camp. The vague demands made by the opposition are simply not enough to mobilise Ukrainian society against the current government. Meanwhile, the tactics that are likely to be used by the government in the upcoming election campaign will focus on welfare and community initiatives. They will also avoid taking any decisions that could worsen the financial situation of voters and thus spark mass protests. The likelihood of such demonstrations immediately after the elections is also low, although this could change if the government is found to have indulged in vote rigging. In that case, protests could become uncontrollable, as the opposition would be unlikely to capitalise on them. At the same time, the already strained relations between Kiev and the West, and the series of actions taken by the Ukrainian government to address these concerns (e.g. the decision to include the opposition in the re-drafting of the electoral law, and the invitation of foreign election observers to the country) may suggest that serious violations of the election process are unlikely. The situation may change, however, after the elections. It is expected that in order to balance the budget and improve the state of public finances, the government will take a series of measures whose results will bear a direct impact on the people of Ukraine. Among the most likely changes is a rise in the price of gas for Ukrainian households (this is also one of the key conditions set by the IMF for the resumption of negotiations on a stabilisation loan) as well as the devaluation of the Ukrainian hryvnia. This could, of course, lead to mass protests, particularly if these changes have a negative impact on the Ukrainian economy.

APPENDIX

1. Is the situation in Ukraine developing in the right direction? (%)



Based on data from the Kiev-based Razumkov Centre (December 2011), http://www.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/news.php?news_id=386

* A rise in positive responses is likely to be linked to the government's pre-election welfare initiatives.

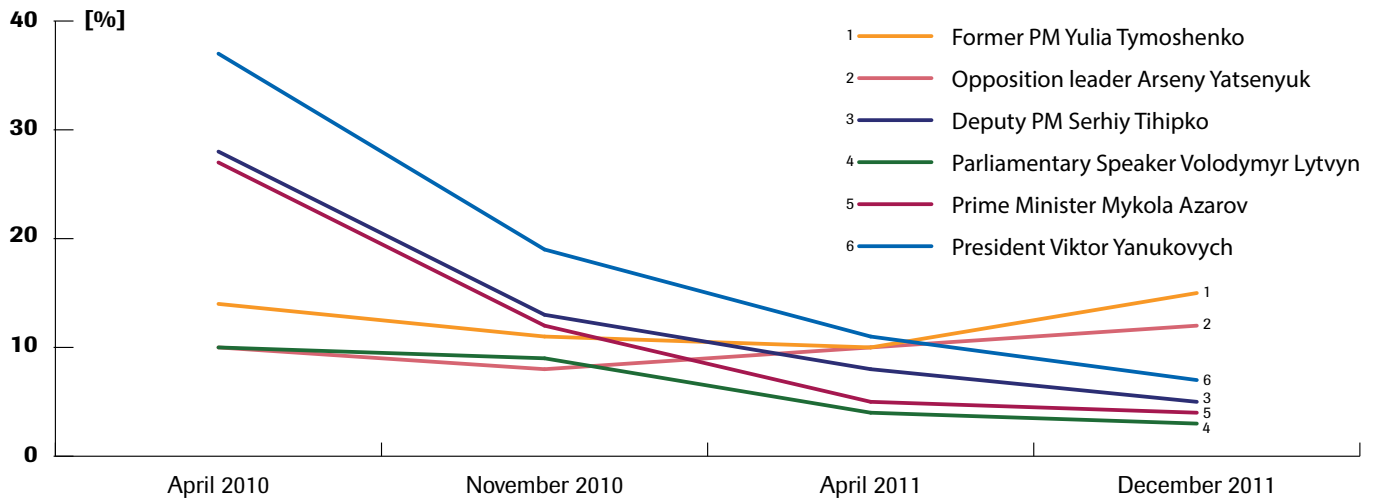
2. Do you trust the following institutions?

	Yes (%)	No (%)
The Church	62	17
The media	40	28
NGOs	27	29
The army	34	37
The opposition	24	53
The president	22	66
The police	15	63
The government	16	69
Parliament	12	73

Source: Razumkov Centre (December 2011), http://www.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/news.php?news_id=386

APPENDIX

3. Do you support the actions of the following politicians? (%)



Source: Razumkov Centre (December 2011), http://www.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/news.php?news_id=386

4. Main themes of protests held in 2011

Theme	(%)
Socio-economic	60
Ideological (e.g. history, national identity)	25
Political	25
Civil rights	17

Source: Centre for Society Research Report, <http://www.cedos.org.ua/protestmonitor/33-reports/118-e-zvit-2011-published>



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