

UKRAINE: Yatsenyuk capitalises on public discontent

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SUBJECT: A profile of Arseniy Yatsenyuk, former parliamentary speaker and possible successor to President Viktor Yushchenko.

SIGNIFICANCE: Yatsenyuk has capitalised on widespread public disillusionment with both the incumbent and opposition ruling elites. His profile has risen significantly in the last six months, and he is now the third most popular presidential contender in Ukraine. [Go to conclusion](#)

ANALYSIS: During his tenure as parliamentary speaker from December 2007 to November 2008, Arseniy Yatsenyuk was regarded as one of a few 'rising stars' affiliated with President Viktor Yushchenko. As such, parliament's vote to remove him from his post last November came as a surprise:

- Just 233 out of 450 parliamentarians voted to oust Yatsenyuk, a close outcome that was only made possible with the support of the United Centre party, which is closely affiliated with controversial presidential secretariat head Viktor Baloha ([see UKRAINE: Next presidential election hinges on Baloha - August 19, 2008](#)).
- No other deputies affiliated with Yushchenko or Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's bloc (BYuT) supported Yatsenyuk's removal.
- Yushchenko probably backed Yatsenyuk's ouster as part of a planned scenario designed to increase the latter's popularity as a political 'martyr', thereby strengthening him in a possible presidential election campaign against Tymoshenko.

Ambitious speakers.

Ukrainian speakers of parliament have traditionally held over-ambitious and excessively optimistic views of their own political prospects. Indeed, former speakers Ivan Pliushch, Oleksandr Moroz, Oleksandr Tkachenko and Volodymyr Lytvyn all harboured unfulfilled presidential ambitions. Yet the position of parliamentary speaker is not the ideal platform from which to launch a presidential bid; former President Leonid Kuchma

Milestones

- Born in Chernivtsi in 1974 to Jewish-Ukrainian parents, Arseniy Yatsenyuk founded and was affiliated with a local legal firm for most of the 1990s.
- In 2001, he held his first government position as economics minister in the autonomous republic of Crimea, and was appointed to a relatively senior position as first deputy head of the National Bank of Ukraine in 2003.
- Yatsenyuk has since held a number of senior positions, including economics minister, foreign minister and speaker of parliament.
- Although he was removed as speaker last November, he has established his own political party (the Front for Change) and is



and Yushchenko both currently considering running for president. prevailed (in 1994 and 2004, respectively) by positioning themselves as opposition leaders, a path that Yatsenyuk might now follow.

Re-emergence. Yatsenyuk has launched the Front for Change party as a new liberal, centre-right political force, but its political traction and popularity have yet to be tested by elections. The growth in Yatsenyuk's popularity has more to do with his personal promise than that of the new party. Opinion polls that place Yatsenyuk as the third most popular presidential contender (behind Party of Regions leader Viktor Yanukovych and Tymoshenko) refer to his party as 'the Yatsenyuk bloc', rather than Front for Change.

Much of Yatsenyuk's rapidly rising support is the result of public discontent over the ruling elites' continual squabbling amid increasingly dire economic conditions (see [UKRAINE: Political chaos hinders anti-crisis programme - January 5, 2009](#)). However, disillusion will not necessarily translate into electoral support:

- In election campaigns, voters make strategic choices based on whether their vote will be ultimately wasted if given to a new party or leader.
- In Ukraine, this effect is magnified by the country's regional diversity, which produces 'negative voting' (voting against an especially unappealing candidate, rather than in favour of a particular individual). In the 2004 presidential election, a significant proportion of the electorate voted against -- rather than in favour of -- Yushchenko or Yanukovych.
- Voters who supported the 2004 'Orange Revolution' must now decide which of three potential candidates -- Tymoshenko, Yushchenko or Yatsenyuk -- is best placed to defeat Yanukovych, who will undoubtedly receive strong systemic and popular support from eastern Ukraine. Judging from the 2007 parliamentary elections, Tymoshenko is currently the only contender capable of garnering nationwide support.

Yushchenko's options. Yushchenko now has two choices in the presidential election. He can:

- stand for re-election with the backing of oligarchs in the Party of Regions as well as Dmytro Firtash, 45% owner of gas intermediary RosUkrEnergo (RUE); or
- decide not to run (as many are advising him) and back Yatsenyuk as his successor.

Yatsenyuk, Yushchenko, Regions and RUE share the common goal of preventing Tymoshenko's election.

Potential challenges. Although Yatsenyuk has been touted as a promising candidate, he must overcome a number of challenges:

- **Uncomfortable oppositionist.** Like Yushchenko, Yatsenyuk is handicapped by his inability to serve as an effective opposition leader who is positioned outside the system, preferring to present himself as a 'constructive oppositionist'. His pragmatic legal and banking background have predisposed him towards a role in the government, rather than as an anti-regime figurehead. Indeed, Yatsenyuk has never criticised Yushchenko for organising his removal as speaker, or Baloha for his unproductive strategies on behalf of the president.
- **Youth.** Yatsenyuk turns 35 (the constitutionally defined minimum age to serve as president) in May, only two months before candidates are registered by the Central Election Commission. His youth could attract younger voters, but his perceived inexperience might alienate older and middle-aged Ukrainians.

- **Anti-Semitism and extremist nationalism.** Although anti-Semitism is not as prevalent in Ukraine as it is in Russia, the popularity of far-right parties is growing -- especially in western Ukraine ([see UKRAINE: Politics may spark latent far-right threat - May 24, 2007](#)), where Yatsenyuk would hope to gain support from voters disillusioned with Yushchenko and Tymoshenko. Some western Ukrainian members of the formerly pro-presidential Our Ukraine-People's Self-Defence (NU-NS) have launched a campaign against Tymoshenko suggesting that she is 'not ethnic Ukrainian' (the prime minister has Armenian and Ukrainian roots). The presidential secretariat participated indirectly in fomenting these ethnically motivated attacks. Yatsenyuk's Jewish heritage could make him vulnerable to similar campaigns.
- **Controversial financing.** Oligarchs Viktor Pinchuk and Serhiy Taruta have openly provided funding to Yatsenyuk. BYuT has also accused Yatsenyuk of receiving financial support from the controversial Firtash, who probably regards Yatsenyuk as a counterweight to the prime minister.
- **Ideological amorphousness.** Yatsenyuk's Front for Change is ideologically amorphous. In media interviews, he has used relatively vague formulations -- support for democracy, preventing monopolisation of power, equal rights for economic entities, political pluralism and "a state-regulated form of liberalism" -- to describe his party's platform. Ukraine has had countless similar political projects, yet few have had much success.

CONCLUSION: Yatsenyuk's popularity has grown in response to four years of infighting between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, as well as the elite's ineffective response to the economic crisis. While he is a member of the next generation of Ukrainian politicians who are likely to make their mark in the 2012 parliamentary elections, until then, he will face stiff competition from other rising stars, such as former Defence Minister Anatoliy Hrytsenko, and will be challenged to overcome his own political weaknesses.

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