

2002 election campaign: summing up

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On March 31, the 2002 election season culminated with the polling day. While exact figures are still unavailable, and the results themselves will be the issue of another article, some conclusions about the campaign itself can be made. The political fashion of this season gave preference to dark colors, and the «election accessories» were predominantly very sharp and sometimes damaged the look of political models...

Analyzing the course of the campaign, Ukrainian politicians differ in their opinions about its quality. Some argue that the campaign was «cleaner» and more fair than the previous ones. Others maintain the opposite was the case and argue that «dirty techniques» and the administrative pressure were the distinguishing features of the campaign. For instance, leader of the United Social Democrats (SDPU(o)) Victor Medvedchuk claims that «this campaign has been more civilized than the previous one, closer to international standards» (Den, March 28, 2002). His view is not shared by leader of the Socialists Oleksandr Moroz. In his opinion, «the current campaign differs from the previous ones by even more blunt use of administrative resource and the sense of impunity among the power-holders and crimes in that field.» Specifically, in his view, «that has been manifested by persecution of forces that are in opposition – and not just in opposition – to the authorities, by the use of the forms of the administrative resource that were not even mentioned before (Den, March 28, 2002). Leader of the Greens Vitaly Kononov believes that «the current campaign is not just totally dirty, it is even – I may say – of a pornographic content <...> the new trend of the current election campaign is the overwhelming presence of black PR that has tinted even such a neutral political force as us.» Communists, according to their leader Petro Symonenko, believe that one of the distinguishing features of the race is the fact that the election campaign used «huge sums of money thrown into it by representatives of criminal capital. The Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Zaporizhyya and Dnipropetrovsk clans have allocated very serious sums in order to protect the politics that allows them to enrich themselves through a possibility to steal by means of using the shadow structures» (Den, March 28, 2002). All of these opinions reflect true sides of the current campaign, as notwithstanding the relatively good and civilized election law the campaign has demonstrated a number of examples of uncivilized behavior of its participants. Noteworthy, one of the most favored themes in debates between politicians has been calls for fair and transparent elections – with fairness and transparency obviously interpreted by them rather freely and in accordance with their own political interests.

One of the most noteworthy new features of the race has been the visible decrease in public support for Communists. For the first time in Ukraine's political history, Communists did not occupy the top line of opinion poll results. Election strategies of political parties that position themselves as centrists and the right were not built as antithesis to the left ideology. One of the reasons for that was the fact that the campaign, for the first time in Ukraine's history, took place in conditions of modest but stable economic growth, with practically no pension and wage arrears, traditionally a keynote issue of economic parts of political parties' campaign agendas.

However, party ideology principles were broadly used in campaign strategies. Political forces actively sought to show their voters their relation to such key global ideologies as liberalism and social democracy, or to communism, or even a peculiar way of conservatism demonstrated by the block of «parties of power», «Za Yedynu Ukrainu». References to those ideologies occurred not only in the course of political debates and meetings with voters, but were also broadly used in political advertising as a key identification of a particular political party or block. The parties' and blocks' efforts to present their agendas to voters were organized according to the parties' and blocks' ideological identification.

Some of the key participants of this campaign are likely to run in the 2004 presidential elections; therefore, for them the current campaign was a way to set foundations for a future victory. Another new feature of this campaign is the reliance on charisma of political leaders – at least on the collection of personal features that are believed to constitute an image of a charismatic political personality in Ukraine. The use of the name of a leader, his or her image, automatically extrapolated on the party or block may be seen as an element of election techniques. A number of creators of so-called «brand blocks» tried to do their best to convince their voters that for them politics is «a calling, not a profession». The technique resulted in the emergence of the blocks named after Natalia Vitrenko, Yulia Tymoshenko, and the Nasha Ukraina block of Victor Yushchenko. The popularity of some names and the attempt to benefit from the use of somebody else's charisma led to several controversial situations. The most noteworthy of them was the attempt by Oleksandr Rzhavsky MP to register a «brand» block «For Yushchenko» and even include some namesake of the ex-prime minister of Ukraine to the list of the block. The block, however, was not registered by the Central Election Commission; thus, the attempt to take away some votes of disoriented voters failed. The «brand name» blocks were not the only ones that built upon the image and perceived charisma of leaders. The SDPU(o) advertising strategy largely relied on building an image of the party leader Victor Medvedchuk, who was featured in the party adds as writing letters to voters, congratulating women, cooking, etc.

Still another feature of the campaign was unprecedented spread of the use of the «twin» technique. As many as 119 «twin» candidates – individuals with the same last names and sometimes even with the same initials - ran for seats in 46 majoritarian constituencies. Noteworthy, «twin» candidates were «attached» not only to the strongest and obvious favorites, but also to their possible main competitors. The technique was used in a very similar manner in most of the regions of Ukraine. The most notorious examples of the

«twin show» occurred in Western Ukraine. In the Lviv region, where Taras Stetskiv MP and Oleksandr Hudyma MP ran for seats in constituencies 118 and 119, respectively, three other Stetskivs and two other Hudymas were registered as candidates. In the Uzhgorod election constituency #71, the regional election commission received registration applications from six Ratushniaks – the ex-mayor of the city and five his «followers».

While the «twin show» was used for misleading voters in majoritarian constituencies, «cloning» of political parties was widely spread as its «partisan» option. While the technique was an «innovation» of this race, some similarities with the 1998 campaign can be observed: the Progressive Socialist Party, formed by Natalia Vitrenko in 1997 as an opposite to Oleksandr Moroz's Socialist Party, took part in the 1998 parliamentary election. In the current campaign, the creation of political parties with similar names and similar ideologies was used to take away a certain proportion of votes from potential leaders of the race. A typical example of the technique was the emergence of the Communist Party of Ukraine (renewed) and the Communist Party of Workers and Peasants. The «old» Communist Party, led by Petro Symonenko, described the new competitors as «the red fake led by the turncoats and traitors». While the new formations are unlikely to become serious competitors to the «traditional» communists who boast stable electorate and a broad network of local organizations, a small proportion of votes – which means a lot in the race - may still be taken away from the party.

In addition to the «compromat wars» and mud baths used as election «techniques» by a number of political forces against their participants, there was some «innovation» – the «tape scandal» involving unauthorized recording of a private phone conversation between leader of the Nasha Ukraina block Victor Yushchenko and mayor of Kyiv Oleksandr Omelchenko. On the day when the moratorium on political advertising and campaigning was lifted, February 9, head of the Rukh Press, former press secretary of the late Vyacheslav Chornovil and present-day spokesman of the «alternative» Rukh za Yednist» Dmytro Ponamarchuk released the recording to the media. The tape presented voices similar to those of Victor Yushchenko and Oleksandr Omelchenko who were discussing preparations for ousting then First Vice Speaker Victor Medvedchuk from his position. However, the trick failed, as even the political community shortly lost interest.

The «compromat wars» were also more sophisticated than before. There were few direct accusations like «candidate N stole a plant from its workers». Instead, political polarization and dependence of Ukrainian media allowed the use of specific interpretations of issues and facts related to the election campaign. The point was not only the unequal opportunity to get access to media resources that hindered the opposition political forces' ability to campaign more effectively, but massive attacks on competitors through presentation of badly distorted information that depicted the competitors in the negative light in a biased manner and did not leave the accused any chance to present their views on the issue. Rather often, the media assisted increasing publicity of «enemies of their enemy» in order to help the opponents of the opponents of those who controlled the media to take away some votes and, thus, weaken their chances.

While in 1998 the Greens managed to overcome the 4-percent barrier, in the 2002 campaign they, as well as another forces that relied mainly on aggressive political advertising strategy, the Komanda Ozymoho Pokolinnya (KOP), failed to convince enough voters. Within the past month, the KOP opted for vast television presence to advertise their motto of bringing new people and liberal ideology to politics. The example illustrates the attempt to build a political brand similarly to the way commercial brands are built, and the outcome of the strategy – the failure in the elections - shows that aggressive advertising cannot substitute systemic party work and a developed network of local party branches.

The political advertising and campaigning was tinted with massive use of the so-called «dirty techniques» - from dissemination of fake leaflets to more serious things – like ordering workers of state-owned enterprises to receive official permission to vote in other place than their place of residence, and then putting them on a bus with instructions on how to vote and driving to another district where a certain result of the voting had to be achieved. Substantial violations were registered in the field of transparency of campaign finance. The loopholes in the legislation made it possible to hide substantial amounts of campaign funds. Meanwhile, official reports about the campaign spending did not reflect irregularities: by February 20, parties and blocks received the total of UAH 13,312 thousand and spend the total of UAH 5,748 thousand. According to the CEC, the largest campaign spending was recorded for «Za Yedynu Ukrainu» (UAH 1,365 thousand), the Yabluko party (UAH 1,166 thousand), «Nasha Ukraina» (UAH 902,000), the SDPU(o) UAH 503,000, and the Green Party UAH 405,000. However, the volume of political advertising broadcast by the TV, judging from official advertising rates, substantially exceeded the officially declared figures. Hence, this campaign was financed in no less a shadow manner than the previous ones.

Officially the political advertising campaign started only on February 9, 2002, though the campaign itself officially began on December 31, 2001. The 40-day moratorium on political campaigning and advertising was introduced in accordance with the election law (Article 50) that stipulates that «the election campaigning begins 50 days before the polling day». While the provision was criticized as limitation of the right of the media to inform about the election process and the right of voters to receive such information, the law had to be observed, though individual violations were reported and the violators reprimanded by the CEC. However, the law did not prohibit campaigning (and, in fact, unlimited spending) before the official start of the race. The loophole was used by many parties, blocks and candidates who used the time and the lack of regulations to bribe their potential voters with various sorts of «assistance», «presents» and charity actions. Some of the parties and blocks did not stop such actions even during the race - which is illegal – but no reaction of the CEC followed.

One of the key themes of the race has been the use of the so-called «administrative resource» – a whole set of mechanisms, tools and techniques that allow state authorities to interfere with the course of an election campaign in favor of or against specific political forces. The state authorities influenced the race by means of controlling access to key resources: material (budget funds and material reserves), administrative pressure

and command, control over national and regional media (the so-called information resource), business, public institutions and services, NGOs, municipal services, hospitals, educational institutions etc. Noteworthy, the actions of state authorities designed to favor a particular force and/or create problems for other participants of the race do not necessarily constitute violation of the law. Although the election law and the new Criminal Code have provisions for sanctions and even for jail sentence for interference with the election process, no criminal cases have been initiated so far.

The campaign has represented broad use of influence of the state authorities on the election process – from forcing «working collectives» of state-owned enterprises, schools, hospitals and alike to join the «parties of power» to preventing «other» political forces from campaigning effectively through creating technical obstacles to them (like cutting off electricity or refusing to lease a large public facility for organizing a meeting with voters). Direct instructions from civil servants to their subordinates as to the force or candidate they should vote for have been often reported by observers. It is impossible to say, though, how much of the votes those methods will eventually bring to the parties and blocks, as the final say still rests with the voters. But the results of their assessment of the parties', blocks' and candidates' pledges and electoral behavior is a different story.