

Local elections in Kyiv test technologies for future presidential race

Vol. 5, No. 129, June 7, 1999

The city of Kyiv has old traditions of self-governance that date back to 1494-1497, when the Lithuanian government granted Kyiv with the Magdeburg right. However, no open general elections of the mayor of Kyiv had been held since 1917. Last year, the mayoral elections in Kyiv were expected to take place on the same day as the general parliamentary elections, on March 29, 1998. Preparations were in process, and even the needed amount of ballots were printed, when the Constitutional Court of Ukraine cancelled the elections of the mayor due to the fact that the law on the capital of Ukraine had not been adopted by the parliament.

In 1998, fourteen candidates for the city's top seat included chairman of the Kyiv city state administration Oleksandr Omelchenko, former mayor of Kyiv Leonid Kosakivsky, former chairman of the Kyiv city state administration Ivan Saliy, members of the Ukrainian parliament Serhiy Holovatyi and Valery Babych. In early February 1999, the parliament returned to the issue and adopted the Law "On the Capital". The issue attracted vivid attention of all major political forces of Ukraine, both due to importance of Kyiv as the capital and the potential value of support the Kyiv city chairman could provide to his favored presidential candidate. The significant issue of timing resulted in debates over the polling date. Suggested dates included April 4, May 16, and the date of the presidential election, October 31. Chairman of the Kyiv city state administration Oleksandr Omelchenko insisted that the mayoral elections should take place on March 28, 1999, while speaker of the parliament Oleksandr Tkachenko advocated a later date, May 16. The contradictions emerged from the fact that potential candidates needed some time for their campaigns to gain momentum; therefore, a later date of the elections would give more chances to all candidates except the main pretender, Oleksandr Omelchenko who was viewed by almost 80 percent of respondents as the most successful candidate. One of potential candidates, Ivan Saliy, later appointed by Omelchenko to be one of his deputies, argued that "if the election is held on March 28, that will be the election of the single candidate, Oleksandr Omelchenko". Political parties, represented in the national parliament, had contrasting opinions on the issue that confirmed vested interest of various political forces to promote certain candidates for the position.

In early March the parliament set the date of the Kyiv mayoral elections on May 30, 1999. The decision - passed without any preliminary discussion - was endorsed by 265 votes with 51 votes against and 6 abstentions. Commenting on the outcome of the vote, Oleksandr Omelchenko admitted that "there were meetings with MPs, compromises, the resolution was endorsed by almost all factions, even in the Hromada 10 people voted "in favor", [and] seven in the Socialist faction. Strange that the Green Party of Ukraine gave only eight votes to support this document, though we have always collaborated with them in a creative way." According to a widespread opinion, the voting resulted from a deal between the most probable forerunner Omelchenko and the parliament's communists, though one of their leaders Georgy Kriuchkov had argued his faction would choose the candidate for the mayor to support "sometime later". Meanwhile, leader of the breakaway part of the Ukrainian People's Movement Rukh and presidential candidate Yuri Kostenko stated "there were no intrigues, at least within the Rukh. Nobody paid or proposed anything to our faction."

The Kyiv mayoral election campaign started slowly. On February 5, Oleksandr Omelchenko told the press he so no realistic candidates to challenge his bid. However, by mid-March the number of pretenders reached about 20, and the city election commission registered 22 NGOs and parties to be engaged in the election process. By the end of the campaign the number of candidates increased to 38, and the number of engaged organizations to 48. Meanwhile, the predominant majority of candidates, including members of the parliament Valery Babych, Vitaly Zhuravsky, Mykhailo Brodsky and Yaroslav Fedoryn could hardly be regarded as serious competitors to Omelchenko: in addition to rather strong public support he enjoyed backing of the state's major political circles and the executive establishment as a successful manager, able to build the capital's infrastructure and mind his business, whose political ambitions would not go beyond the position of the mayor of Kyiv. This backing may be illustrated by the comments of first deputy chairman of the Kyiv City Council Volodymyr Yalovy who believed that "as soon as Omelchenko comes [to power in the city], the work will speed up. As you may see, the capital is [a] legitimate [entity] ... votes "in favor" were given by communists, some members of the Hromada led by Yulia Tymoshenko. We are very grateful to Oleksandr Tkachenko, his deputies Adam Martyniuk and Victor Medvedchuk who have supported us from the first day.

Omelchenko is not an office type of leader. He is pragmatic in many ways." Omelchenko's election bid was supported by Kyiv organizations of both left-wing and right-wing parties like the People's Democratic party, the Liberal party, the Peasants' party, as well as organizations of the communists, socialists and progressive socialists.

The most remarkable situation occurred in the Rukh, recently split up in two wings. Members of the Rukh are the majority in the Kyiv City Council. The council of the Rukh's Kyiv-based regional organization recommended to endorse the candidacy of Yaroslav Fedoryn, MP, or Oleksandr Omelchenko, or member of the Rukh's parliamentary faction Valery Asadchev, though Fedoryn repeatedly stated he was "definitely" going to run for mayor. Meanwhile, the part of the Rukh currently led by Hennadiy Udovenko announced they would support Oleksandr Omelchenko. A hidden reason for the switch was that Fedoryn belonged to Kostenko's "other Rukh".

The situation changed radically at the end of April, when the Kyiv city organization of the Social Democratic Party (United) nominated Hryhory Surkis, MP, one of Ukraine's most successful businessmen and honorary president of the Dynamo Kyiv football club, to run for the position of head of the Kyiv self-governance body and become the major challenger to Oleksandr Omelchenko's mayoral ambitions. Commenting on the nomination, representatives of policy-making and opinion-forming circles suggested that the so-called "oligarches" who backed Mr. Surkis would seek to use the election campaign in the capital to convince the incumbent president of their own value and significance. Should Hryhory Surkis have won the mayoral elections, the subsequent presidential campaign would likely have been developed along the lines of the scenario, created by his team. Now after he lost, chances are that he and his team may have to vacate their places in the presidential circles to more successful ones.

While it was a common opinion that President Kuchma's re-election chances would significantly depend on who would win the top seat in Kyiv, in April there were no indications as to who of the candidates might count on the President's support, as no official position on that issue was made public. Political analysts and opinion-formers spoke about "double-dealing" practiced by the executive branch. Oleksandr Omelchenko seemed to have lost some of his confidence in his easy victory. "I do not understand how a person can claim a job if he knows he will be unable to do it anyway," said he, arguing that "the responsibility that will be put on the mayor will be great, but there are many players [seeking] to fool the people".

While Oleksandr Omelchenko and Hryhory Surkis seemed prepared to use most of their resources to win, other candidates' objectives hardly went beyond getting extra publicity to their own capacities or political forces.

The President's preference for one of the candidates appeared in early May, when during the Victor Day memorial events he responded to the question in the following way: "As the President, I have no right to say who I support, but now you see my participation, so you can understand yourself." Some of the candidates, including the parliament's "antimafia" activist Hryhory Omelchenko, MP, and Vitaly Zhuravsky, MP, withdrew from the race in favor of Omelchenko, who enjoyed broad support of center-right parties. Even the split-up Rukh agreed on supporting Omelchenko as their candidate. According to Rukh's leader Hennadiy Udovenko, "we believed that much in this state depends on the person who is the chairman of the capital. It is no secret that he who rules the capital rules the state. Oleksandr Omelchenko is the person who stands on the statehood positions." His rival for Rukh leadership Yuri Kostenko stated that "for several years of independence we have observed actions of individual heads of city administration. Oleksandr Omelchenko's activities differ favorably from actions of his predecessors." Former leader of the People's Democratic party Anatoly Matvienko told the press he had information that the united Social Democrats formed a group of 50 MPs who intended not only to call on their supporters to back Hryhory Surkis in his bid for the mayor's seat, but to be directly involved in activities of election commission on the polling day. "If this information is confirmed, we [i.e., national democrats] will also go, obviously, to support Omelchenko. And we will not be 50, but many more," he said. Oleksandr Omelchenko received positive comments from speaker of the parliament Oleksandr Tkachenko, who argued that "Kyivites will be electing not the city chairman, but the fate. From all heads of the Kyiv power, I remembered three: Burka, Zgursky, Omelchenko. The latter has done for Kyiv and Kyivites as much as no other leader anywhere else. God help such a leader work in Kyiv for as long as possible."

According to analysts and observers, the election campaign was unprecedented in the span of the "war of compromat" in the form of an avalanche of leaflets, unverified statements and disclosures, regularly refuted by the other party. Repeated claims that election results would be falsified could be subsequently used by the losing party to endorse their lawsuit against the winner or prepare public opinion to possible abolishing of the election outcome.

The storming media campaign launched by Hryhory Surkis may be regarded as an example of how to get in the spotlight of public attention within one month. In addition to his campaign clips, Mr. Surkis appeared in programs broadcast by the Inter, the Studio 1+1 and the UT-1. Prominent Ukrainian personalities called on Kyivites to elect a new mayor. One of major national channels, Inter, previously run by Oleksandr Zinchenko, MP, showed Omelchenko as Bulgakov's character Sharikov, a creature that bore little resemblance to a human being. After the election results were made public, Omelchenko announced he would sue the TV channel and seek to destroy it. Massive amounts of leaflets, disseminated before the polling day, alleged that the Omelchenko family operated illegal business, while other maintained Surkis was involved in obscure deals with budget funds. Shortly before the polling day boxes of controversial leaflets were found in the premises of a local election commission.

Although preliminary results of the elections were said to show clear victory of Oleksandr Omelchenko, it too the Kyiv election commission to summarize the final results. According to chairman of the commission Mykhailo Tereshchenko, 19 of 46 registered candidates dropped out of the race at the initial stage. 963 thousand of almost 1,950 thousand eligible voters in Kyiv came to the polling stations; 697 thousand of them supported Oleksandr Omelchenko and almost 150,6 thousand voted for Hryhory Surkis. The Kyiv city election commission announced Oleksandr Omelchenko to be the winner and legitimately elected mayor of Kyiv. While the pre-election battles are over, some of their active participants may be facing lawsuits. Hryhory Surkis sued on June 5, claiming that the election results were falsified and demanding the case to be heard by the Vyshgorod district court in a suburb of Kyiv, and not in a Kyiv-based court, so that to reduce the possible pressure on the court. The Vyshgorod district court is expected to hear the case on June 15, 1999. Although it is hard to believe that much of the 76 percent of the vote received by Oleksandr Omelchenko was forged, election results will be cancelled should falsification be proved to have taken place by the court, and the falsification "know-how" may suggest possible "weak points" in the election process to watch in the course of the final stage of the presidential race.