

Tymoshenko Loses her Magic in Ukraine Presidential Race

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A woman and her daughter walking past a ripped poster of Tymoshenko in Luhansk, eastern Ukraine, last week.

Campaigning for Ukraine's presidential election, Yulia Tymoshenko said she alone can save the nation from disaster. It is a refrain that has served her well in the past but the voters no longer seem to be listening.

Opinion polls put former Prime Minister Tymoshenko in a distant second place behind confectionery magnate Petro Poroshenko for Sunday's vote with just 10 percent support — humiliating a woman whose trademark peasant's hair braid and rhetoric have defined Ukrainian politics for a decade.

But her supporters, who insist the polls are wrong, and political analysts said it would be rash to write off Tymoshenko, whose ambition and self-belief appear undimmed by health problems and by a jail sentence that ended in February.

"I will do whatever I can as president to ensure that Ukraine decides its own future in Europe

as a full-fledged member of the democratic world," she told reporters after addressing supporters at a business forum in Kiev this week.

In typically combative mood, she called for a referendum on joining NATO and the European Union as part of a campaign she said could force Russia to reverse its annexation of Crimea and to stop meddling in mainly Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine.

Her promises of tax reform and a crackdown on corruption drew enthusiastic applause from supporters, mostly small businessmen from more nationalist-minded western Ukraine.

"I do not understand those who say she is a divisive figure. She can unite our country. Her first language is Russian and she comes from the east," said Oleg Tymo, 44, a businessman from the far-western city of Lviv near the Polish border.

Tymoshenko remains Ukraine's most eloquent and recognizable politician and she likes to stress her experience. But at a time of yearning for change that may prove a handicap, not an asset.

Another Country

A leader of the Orange Revolution protests of 2004 and 2005, she served her two terms as prime minister before narrowly losing to arch-rival Viktor Yanukovich in a 2010 presidential run-off.

Under Yanukovich, she was jailed on abuse of office charges which her supporters and the West said were politically motivated. Moscow-backed Yanukovich lost power in February after months of sometimes violent street protests centered on Kiev's Independence Square, or Maidan, and fled to Russia, opening the way for this week's presidential election.

But Tymoshenko left jail to find a very different Ukraine, one traumatized by the 100-plus deaths during the protests and now reeling from the loss of Crimea and Russia's military moves that have stirred fears of a new cold war with the West.

"Something has changed. There has been a paradigm shift. In Ukraine there used to be an attitude of 'let us elect a strong leader and in a few months' time all will come right' but that attitude has gone," said one Kiev-based Western diplomat. "The 'Maidan' revolt happened because people took responsibility into their own hands. Tymoshenko did not take part because she was in jail. She only got polite applause when she finally addressed the Maidan and shed tears on stage, saying Ukraine's leaders were not worthy of its people."

"She does her voodoo but it does not work any more," he said.

This view is borne out on the streets of Kiev.

"Her time has passed ... Events have shown that people want new faces," said Roman Chivilno, 27, an IT product manager.

"I am not going to vote for Tymoshenko, she is oriented towards internal conflicts in Ukraine and this is the last thing we need right now," said pensioner Yurii Pisachenko, 74, alluding to bitter power struggles that marred her past stints in office.

Tymoshenko, 53, has adjusted her style to match the more somber mood, swapping her hair-braid for a more staid bun and dressing modestly. She walks slowly, often leaning on an aide's arm, clearly still suffering from the back pain that plagued her in jail and for which she has received treatment in Germany.

Even support in her own camp seemed sometimes to fall short of the ringing endorsement she might once have expected.

"All our politicians have skeletons in their cupboard and there are no new faces ... She is simply the best candidate of the bunch," said Alexander Davtian, who runs a construction business in the eastern city of Kharkiv.

Down But Not Out

However, nobody expects Tymoshenko to quit politics if she loses to Poroshenko on Sunday — or in a second round on June 15 if he fails to win an absolute majority in the first. She will merely bide her time, analysts say, believing that Ukraine's huge economic problems will quickly erode his support.

"Tymoshenko will probably go into opposition but she remains one of Ukraine's most experienced managers and politicians. It would be quite wrong to think her political career is at an end," said Vadim Karasyov, a political analyst.

As prime minister, Tymoshenko had a tumultuous relationship with former President Viktor Yushchenko, who had been her ally in the Orange Revolution. Recalling this, a victorious Poroshenko is unlikely to offer her a job in his government, even if she defies the polls and manages to force a run-off.

Poroshenko and Tymoshenko are united in their support for closer economic and political ties with Europe and in their condemnation of what they say is Russia's backing of pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine. But, the Western diplomat said, "she is too disruptive. It would be suicidal for Poroshenko to bring her into a new government."

She and Poroshenko also clashed during her time as prime minister. When he was secretary of the National Defense and Security Council, she attacked him in 2005 and then accused him of involvement in corruption. The scandal ended only when Yushchenko sacked them both.

Tymoshenko retains influence in the current parliament, where her Fatherland party is the second largest after the Party of the Regions, the former party of Yanukovich. Ukraine's interim president and prime minister are both from her party, but they have kept their distance from her campaign. Analysts also said some advisers have left the Tymoshenko camp after advising against her presidential bid.

Volodymyr Fesenko, an analyst at think tank Penta, said Tymoshenko had shown a lack of strategy in her campaign, putting off voters at such a tense time with increasingly sharp attacks on Poroshenko and claims that only she is fit to lead Ukraine.

"Internal conflicts are just not acceptable for society at a time when the country faces external aggression," he said. "And her calls for a referendum on joining NATO will not net her more

votes. The NATO issue divides Ukrainian society." Russia strongly opposes Ukraine joining the Western military alliance, as are many voters in eastern Ukraine.

But Fesenko said he also expected Tymoshenko to weather any election setback. "I do not think she will leave politics. She has regained her energy, she is ready again to fight."

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