

# The Revolutionary Agnostics

## Ukraine's Swing Voters

*Dr. Karen Buerkle is a Senior Researcher in IFES' Applied Research Center for Democracy and Elections.*

Those who witnessed Ukraine's Orange Revolution from the comfort of their living rooms may still recall the images of orange-clad demonstrators jammed into Kiev's Independence Square. In 2004, pictures of ordinary Ukrainians protesting the electoral fraud that led to Viktor Yuschenko's defeat in the November presidential election flooded TV sets and the front pages of newspapers around the world. Close followers of these events might even remember images of scattered groups of counter-demonstrators, waving blue flags and insisting that Viktor Yanukovich had won the election fairly. However, what none of us saw were pictures of the thousands upon thousands of Ukrainians who were sitting at home in their armchairs, watching these very same images.

While political analysis and press accounts of the Orange Revolution and Ukraine's post-revolution political environment have focused on Ukraine as a "divided nation," the data shows that many Ukrainians were not diehard adherents of either side. In fact, surveys indicate that Ukrainians do not fit nicely into these analytic dichotomies—Eastern Ukraine vs. Western Ukraine, those who see Ukraine's future with Russia vs. those who look to the EU and the West, or people who support Yanukovich vs. people who support Yuschenko.

### **A More Nuanced View**

Shortly after the dust of the revolution settled, USAID asked IFES' Applied Research Center for Democracy and Elections to conduct a public opinion survey<sup>1</sup> in order to better understand Ukraine's post-revolution political landscape. By classifying people on the basis of their opinions about the revolution and how the December elections might shape Ukraine's future—rather than using a one-dimensional measure such as voting behavior—a more complex profile of Ukrainian citizens emerged.<sup>2</sup> Based on the results of our analysis, we divided Ukrainians into three groups: "Revolutionary Enthusiasts," "Revolutionary Opponents" and "Revolutionary Agnostics." Revolutionary Enthusiasts and Revolutionary Opponents are the polar ends of the scale in the analytical dichotomy with which we are most familiar. Both groups have certain and strong opinions about the recent political events in Ukraine. Enthusiasts tend to agree strongly that the demonstrations were a legitimate exercise of democratic rights and raised valid concerns about the legitimacy of the November 21 second round of the presidential elections. Solid majorities of this group also believe the revolution will benefit all Ukrainians, generate greater government responsiveness and ultimately produce a more stable and prosperous Ukraine. Revolutionary Opponents hold exactly the opposite view, and instead are more likely to think that the

only purpose of the demonstrations was to create chaos in the country. They also hold negative views about what the revolution will mean for Ukraine's future. They believe the revolution will benefit only some groups, and government officials will not be any more responsive than they were in the past. Only 5% of Opponents believe the revolution has set Ukraine on a path towards stability and prosperity.

### **Revolutionary Agnostics**

The Revolutionary Agnostics are the least discussed segment of Ukraine's population, despite the fact that they account for roughly 30% of it. Agnostics are set apart by their weakly held assessments of the revolution, either positive or negative, and their indecisiveness towards many issues. Large numbers of them respond "don't know" when asked whether or not the demonstrations raised valid concerns, whether they were a legitimate exercise of democratic rights or if their only aim was to incite chaos. Agnostics are also unsure what the revolution will mean for Ukraine's future. Nearly half of this group does not have an opinion about whether the revolution has set Ukraine on a path of stability or one of instability. Likewise, keeping with their characteristic uncertainty, many in this group are either unsure whether their elected officials will now be more responsive or are weakly optimistic or pessimistic about improvements in democratic representation as a result of the revolution. They are also split over whether the revolution will benefit all Ukrainians or only some groups.

Revolutionary Agnostics are difficult to characterize based on demographics because they are a cross section of Ukrainian society. They are just as likely to be male as female, and their educational levels and ethnic diversity mirror that of the country as a whole. However, a majority of them are between the ages of 18-35, and many students can be counted among their ranks. In addition, they are concentrated in Ukraine's larger cities and in the east, but they can also be found in smaller numbers throughout the country and in smaller towns and villages. Revolutionary Agnostics tend to live in oblasts with moderate support for both candidates and are nearly equally split in their votes for Yuschenko and Yanukovich.

### **Yuschenko's Challenge**

If it is to succeed in the long term, the government has two tasks with regard to public opinion prior to the 2006 elections. First, it needs to hold onto the ranks of the Revolutionary Enthusiasts. While this group is predisposed to view the new government favorably, it may be difficult to manage their high expectations in light of the hum-drum reality that change happens much too slowly and incompletely for many people's liking. Second, the government needs to win over more Ukrainians. There are about twice as many Revolutionary Enthusiasts (48%) among Ukraine's adult population as Revolutionary Opponents (23%); however, Enthusiasts are not a clear majority. While it is unlikely that hard core Opponents will be affixing "I love Yuschenko" bumper stickers to their cars any time soon, the Revolutionary Agnostics (who have not yet made up their minds one way or the other) may

be susceptible to persuasion. They are Ukraine's swing voters and are likely to play a major role in deciding the direction of the 2006 parliamentary elections and whether Yushchenko's government will have the strength it needs to continue making reforms.

Revolutionary Agnostics, Enthusiasts and Opponents all agree that economic concerns are the most important issues facing Ukraine today. Addressing the country's economic problems in an effective manner will be influential in healing rifts that currently divide Ukrainians. In addition to improving Ukraine's general economic situation and lowering unemployment, many Agnostics, Enthusiasts and Opponents say improving the country's health care and pension systems should be among the top three priorities of this government.

However, it will not be easy to mobilize the Agnostics, as they tend to be less engaged in public life. The majority of Agnostics say they are not too interested or only somewhat interested in matters of politics and government, while both Enthusiasts and Opponents are more likely to be somewhat or very interested. Unsurprisingly, voting turnout among Agnostics tends to be on the low side. Similar to Opponents, only about half of Agnostics say they are very likely to vote in the 2006 parliamentary elections. (In contrast, seven of ten Enthusiasts say they are very likely to take part in the elections.)

In addition, Agnostics often feel alienated from political power and see little benefit in political participation. In this regard, they are more similar to Opponents than Enthusiasts. Only 18% of Agnostics agree that people like them can influence decision making in the country, a belief held by a similarly low proportion of Opponents (13%). By contrast, nearly half (47%) of Enthusiasts believe ordinary people can influence decision making. In a similar vein, a slim majority (52%) of Agnostics disagree that voting gives people a chance to influence decision making. Opponents are even less likely to believe that voting equals power (78%), while most Enthusiasts (83%) believe that voting gives them a say in decision making.

However difficult it might be to engage the Agnostics, the fate of Yushchenko's government—and any lasting impact from the Orange Revolution—may lie in their hands.

© 2005 IFES

### **Notes**

**1** *Survey results are based on face-to-face interviews conducted by TNS-Ukraine under the direction of IFES' Applied Research Center among a nationally representative sample of 1,265 adults, 18 years of age or older, from February 15-28, 2005. The margin of error for a sample of this size is plus or minus 3%. Interviews were conducted in both Ukrainian and Russian.*

**2** Respondents were classified based on their answers to the following questions: "The use of demonstrations was a legitimate exercise of democratic rights by those organizing and participating in the demonstrations"; "The demonstrations raised valid concerns about the fairness of the Nov. 21 second-round of the presidential elections"; "The only purpose of the demonstrations was to create chaos in the country"; "The demonstrations have played a role in furthering democracy in Ukraine"; "Which do you agree with more: The cancellation of the Nov. 21 election and the holding of another election on Dec. 26 represents a victory for democracy that will benefit all Ukrainian citizens OR The cancellation of the Nov. 21 election and the holding of another election on Dec. 26 benefits only some groups in Ukrainian society"; "Elected officials in Ukraine will be more responsive to the needs of their constituents in the future than they have been in the past"; "Do you think the results of the Dec. 26 election have placed Ukraine on the right track toward stability and prosperity in the future, or do you think that the results have placed Ukraine on a path toward instability and chaos in the future?"