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Ukraine Needs a Political, Not a Technocrat, Prime Minister

By Bob McEwen

Ukraine's parliamentary election seems sure to deliver President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's party a strong affirmation. The drama rests with another question: Who should be the prime minister during Zelenskiy's tenure?

That question contains many others: Who can best handle negotiations with the IMF? Who can best face up to Russia and talk to the new team that will soon be leading the European Union? Who is equipped to negotiate with the Asian giants – China and India – who are increasingly important trade partners for Ukraine? Who can talk to U.S. President Donald Trump? But the most important question of all is this: Who can help President Zelenskiy unlock Ukraine's vast potential and thereby raise the living standards of its people?

Let's start with what Ukraine does not need: a technocrat. The failures of technocratic governments in Italy, Greece, and elsewhere in recent years give potent witness. The inability of those governments to forge programs politically palatable to their citizens have left them in far worse shape than before the technocrats took office. Failures in both those countries led to the advent of populist governments.

What Ukraine needs is someone with the political instincts to work at President Zelenskiy's side in confronting the massive problems. Here, the real issue is whether the next prime minister will be someone who has not only tackled Ukraine's problems head-on before, but is a familiar face and voice to the world leaders with whom Ukraine must deal if its security is to be maintained and economy to prosper.

Put simply, there is no one in Ukraine who can match Yuliya Tymoshenko in both experience and global connections.

Indeed, the seminal attribute that Tymoshenko could bring once more to Ukraine's premiership, should the Rada choose her following the elections, is that rare capacity to recognize sound economic, political, and strategic arguments in the midst of a crisis. Tymoshenko has proven to be a shrewd judge of the technical advice given to her. She understands that unless technical solutions can gain public support, they are always doomed to failure.

Recall the financial crisis of 2008. As the world's financial superstructure approached meltdown in the autumn of 2008, Tymoshenko's cool-headedness in the face of a threat to Ukraine's financial stability was critical. Numerous technocrats were advising that she not repay a loan being called in by the U.S. investment bank Morgan Stanley. Tymoshenko, as she would do throughout her years as Ukraine's prime minister, listened to the technocrats and then listened to her inner politician. Despite many of her technocratic advisors, both domestic and foreign, urging her not to repay, Tymoshenko understood that the real issue was Ukraine's standing among nations. If Ukraine was seen as pulling the plug on the world economy, it would become an international pariah. So, painful as it was, she authorized repayment – positioning Ukraine as a stable reliable partner for both governments and investors.

The recent presidential election clearly demonstrated that the Ukrainian people are in no mood for a government that imposes its solutions to their problems. That is the way with technocratic administrations. Technocrats are obsessed with what they think best for their institutions. They are simply incapable of understanding the essential need to secure the consent of the governed.

Clearly, there are severe limits to the benefits of technocratic thinking when crafting effective government policy. As the work of the MIT economist Daron Acemoglu has demonstrated, policy ideas that are eminently sensible in theory all too often fail in practice because of unintended and unforeseen *political* consequences. Moreover, the supposedly “good” economic policies that technocrats promulgate usually have the unfortunate side effect of reinforcing already dominant groups and weakening frail ones. If there is one lesson to be drawn from President Zelenskiy’s victory this spring it is that the Ukrainian population is no longer willing to pay the price for policies that are not going to bring direct improvements to their lives.

Ukraine’s problems – the war in Donetsk and Luhansk, the fight against corruption, the country’s negotiations with the IMF, to name a few – all demand wise political solutions, not technical ones. They will only be resolved with the consent of Ukrainians, and that consent can only be gained by the efforts of a savvy and experienced politician.

Yuliya Tymoshenko is such a politician.

Having suffered years of unjust imprisonment, she senses first-hand how her fellow citizens feel about the corruption and incompetence that too often typify the Ukrainian state’s actions. She possesses an instinctive feel for the needs of Ukrainians. And that is just what the country cries out for in its prime minister at this moment.

Bob McEwen is a former Member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Ohio.