

Putin's Shrewd Endorsement of Tymoshenko

By [Yevgeny Kiselyov](#)

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Foreign diplomats and journalists have thoroughly dissected and ridiculed President Vladimir Putin's statements concerning Ukraine at last Tuesday's news conference, but it is worth looking past the husk of propaganda to find the important kernel of substance he sought to convey — his short-term plan of action for Ukraine

We all thought that Putin's remarks meant that Russia was temporarily suspending its use of military force in the region, but now it seems that a covert action has continued — there are too many reports of the so-called green-clad men advancing on Ukrainian military positions to deny it. Although some of the reports are unconfirmed, the general feeling is that Russian military operations have not been suspended.

Moscow sees in Tymoshenko
an opportunity to restore
the status quo.

If the international community takes him to task for violating the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, Putin will advance the questionable but clever argument that Russia is assuming responsibility for defending the territorial integrity of the former Ukraine — not the country born of the Maidan and an armed insurrection. Putin assumes no obligations with regard to that country or government.

Putin made it very clear that Moscow would like to see former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko become that country's next president. He alluded to this twice recently, using almost exactly the same wording each time and wistfully recalling their productive working relationship.

Why is Putin endorsing Tymoshenko? Does he want to undermine her chances of winning the presidential elections on May 25 by casting her as the Kremlin favorite? Or does he have just the opposite plan in mind — to help Tymoshenko win the support of the pro-Russian voters who previously stood behind former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich?

The second theory is bolstered by the fact that Tymoshenko holds very close political ties to Viktor Medvedchuk, once the head of former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma's administration and a man who has long and unabashedly been Putin's personal agent for influencing the situation in Ukraine. Also, Medvedchuk's long-time political and business partner, Andrei Klyuyev — a pro-Russian politician and former head of Yanukovich's presidential administration — was one of the main advocates for unifying the Party of Regions with the bloc supporting Tymoshenko into a so-called "broad" coalition in 2009.

The new coalition was to use its constitutional majority of over 300 votes to amend the Constitution so that the president was elected not by a popular vote, but by the deputies in parliament. In other words, Tymoshenko and Yanukovich would have guaranteed themselves leading government posts years in advance. However, the plan fell through at the last moment.

Two recent voter polls — the first in a decade to not include any reference to Yanukovich — surprisingly revealed that a majority of the former president's supporters now favor leading opposition figure Petro Poroshenko, owner of the major confectionery firm Roshen, and a strong advocate of Ukraine's integration with the European Union. Poroshenko was one of the main victims of former Russian chief sanitary inspector Gennady Onishchenko, who banned imports of Roshen chocolates for alleged violations of sanitation codes.

Poroshenko was the main sponsor of the first Maidan in 2004. He had hoped to become prime minister, but then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko chose Tymoshenko for the post. They remain bitter enemies to this day. As a result of their feud, they both lost their jobs in fall 2005. However, Poroshenko went on to serve as the last foreign minister under Yushchenko and later to work as economy minister for almost one year under Yanukovich in the next to last Cabinet formed by former Prime Minister Mykola Azarov.

Poroshenko was one of the most active opposition leaders during the current Maidan and all polls predict he will garner at least 20 percent in the first round of voting — the highest of all presidential candidates. The same polls put boxer and opposition figure Vitaly Klitschko in second place with up to 14 percent in the first round of voting and Tymoshenko in third place, with under 10 percent.

The word on the street is that Tymoshenko's time has long passed — people are glad she was released from prison and is no longer subjected to persecution, but they do not want her to return to power. In truth, the Maidan gave her only a lukewarm reception. They smiled and applauded her speech, but they never broke into rousing chants of "Yulia! Yulia! Yulia!" And when an awkward pause interrupted her speech as medics treated someone in the crowd, she chose to simply leave the stage without a parting word.

Considering that Tymoshenko's electorate traditionally includes elderly rural voters whom pollsters rarely survey, she stands a chance of once again outperforming predictions by at least 5 percent. However, Poroshenko and Klitschko hold an unexpectedly large lead over her, and it would come as no surprise if the two of them battled it out for the presidency in the second round of voting.

Of course, Ukraine has returned to the 2004 version of its Constitution that grants the president significantly fewer powers than those enjoyed by Kuchma and Yanukovich, but lawmakers might choose to amend the Constitution once again.

And keep in mind that Putin threatened that Moscow will not recognize the results if "the elections are held with such terror" as occurred on Maidan. He would undoubtedly make good on that threat if a nationalist or anti-Semite unexpectedly won. And although Poroshenko and Klitschko are neither, Putin might link their names to radicals as a pretext for discounting any winner other than Tymoshenko.

Yevgeny Kiselyov is a political analyst and television journalist.

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