

President Faced With Defeat in Ukraine Polls

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MOSCOW: The former Prime Minister, Viktor Yanukovich, captured an early lead in Ukraine's presidential election, which looks set to bring a crushing defeat for incumbent President Viktor Yushchenko.

Two exit polls cited by Russian news agencies gave Mr. Yanukovich between 36 to 40 per cent of the votes, with Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko coming in second with 21 to 24 per cent, and ex-Governor of the National Bank Sergei Tigipko trailing them with 10 to 15 per cent. These results, if confirmed, mean that a runoff will have to be held on February 7.

Meanwhile, Mr. Yanukovich has already taken revenge on his archrival, Mr. Yushchenko, who was swept into power five years ago by the West-orchestrated "orange revolution," which overturned Mr. Yanukovich's election victory. Mr. Yushchenko's popularity has since tumbled to less than 5 per cent over his failure to honour election promises, his patently anti-Russian policies and bitter infighting in the "orange" camp.

Low turnout

The voting on Sunday was marked by a record low turnout reflecting voters' deep alienation and suspicions of large-scale vote rigging. A mere five per cent of Ukrainians thought the election would be fair. Four hours before the polling stations closed less than 50 per cent of the electorate cast their votes, the lowest figure for 10 years. Moscow, which burned its fingers in the 2004 election, when it squarely backed Mr. Yanukovich, this time has kept its distance, expressing only the hope that the next Ukrainian President would follow a more friendly policy towards Russia.

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