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## A World Champion Who Could Be a Contender in Ukraine



Vitali Klitschko, left, and his brother Wladimir are sports heroes in Ukraine.

AS Vitali Klitschko strode down a street in Kiev this week, all heads swiveled to take in his enormous physique. Handsome, in a brutal fashion, with bulging veins in his neck, he reached out to greet well-wishers with hands the size of dinner plates, ones best known for knocking out 39 opponents in a professional boxing career.

But Mr. Klitschko, the reigning World Boxing Council world heavyweight champion, was not here in the capital for his next fight, and he was not greeting his fans. In his booming voice, he was talking about Ukrainian politics, invoking an unending stream of boxing analogies that has proven alluring here.

His opposition party, The Punch, won seats in local legislatures in 15 of Ukraine's 24 regions last fall. Nationally, his aides say, polls show support for the party from about 4.5 percent of likely voters — not overwhelming, but enough to clear a 3 percent threshold to qualify for parliamentary elections scheduled for next year.

Mr. Klitschko, who fought his first bout for the world title against Lennox Lewis in Los Angeles in 2003, is now fighting to rally Ukraine's fractured opposition. He is pro-European integration and favors Ukrainian as a national language. But his central appeal seems to be that he is strong and tall, and that he has never held public office in Ukraine before.

Political experts and diplomats say the perpetual infighting among the Ukrainian political class, on display last week when prosecutors arrested the leading opposition politician Yulia V. Tymoshenko — during a trial on what her supporters say are trumped-up charges — has so disillusioned the electorate here that people are eager for new faces in politics.

Mr. Klitschko, who halted his twice-daily routine of running, lifting and sparring last week to rush back to Kiev from his training site in Austria to speak out against Ms. Tymoshenko's arrest, says he is in politics in hopes of reviving the jaded opposition here.

"It's just not normal when one after another opposition politician ends up in jail," Mr. Klitschko said in a recent interview, alluding to what rights advocates say is a sweeping purge of opposition figures by the government of President Viktor F. Yanukovich. He was quick to add, however, that he was supporting political freedoms, not Ms. Tymoshenko personally.

"Of course we understand that Tymoshenko is not holy," he said. "There are negative aspects of her behavior. The current government and the opposition that has periodically traded places are worthy of each other."

In one indication of the opportunity for new figures, polls here indicate that roughly 35 percent of likely voters are undecided. Many are former supporters of the coalition that came to power after the street protests known as the Orange Revolution, Mikhail B. Pogrebinsky, director of the Center for Political and Conflict Studies, said in an interview.

"The popularity of the government is falling but people don't want to vote for the Orange group," Mr. Pogrebinsky said. "An opportunity is here for a new figure."

In contrast with Ukraine's neighbors Belarus and Russia, in the nearly 20 years since independence was declared in Ukraine on Aug. 24, 1991, numerous political parties have put down roots. Some support local causes like western Ukrainian nationalism and closer ties with Russia on the Crimean Peninsula. Others are more national in scope, or pro-business, while many are splinter groups centered on personalities like Ms. Tymoshenko.

Parliament is a kaleidoscope of six political parties and two dozen independent members. Ukraine is also more diverse than Belarus, split between a pro-Russian east and pro-European west.

That means that even if Mr. Yanukovich is attempting a political consolidation here similar to what Vladimir V. Putin carried out in Russia, as his critics contend, it is likely to be a drawn-out struggle. Mr. Yanukovich, for his part, says prosecutors are merely cracking down on corruption.

Paradoxically, the arrest of Ms. Tymoshenko seems to have breathed new life into the opposition, as a dozen parties formed a temporary alliance, the Dictatorship Resistance Committee, to protest the arrest.

MR. KLITSCHKO, the son of a Soviet air force general, is a bona fide boxing great. He is one of only four fighters to win a version of the world title three different times — Muhammad Ali, Mr. Lewis and Evander Holyfield are the others. He and his brother, Wladimir, also a boxer, are sports heroes in Ukraine.

In seeking to make a splash in politics, Mr. Klitschko is following a path blazed most recently by Manny Pacquiao, a world champion in several weight classes and a congressman in the Philippines, who is rumored to be considering a run for president there.

Mr. Klitschko, who is 40, speaks four languages and holds a Ph.D. in sports science — leading him to promote himself professionally as Dr. Ironfist on his Web site — has had a slow start in politics, losing twice in races for mayor of Kiev.

"In boxing and politics you cannot predict results," Mr. Klitschko said. "You should be ready to go 12 rounds. But if you win in the first round, you should be ready to be the winner quickly."

Like many in Ukraine, his politics have traced the arc from enthusiasm to disillusionment with the Orange Revolution. In headier times, he defended the world title against Danny Williams of Britain in December 2004, while wearing an orange cloth, and then dedicated the victory to Ukrainian democracy.

After a news conference in Kiev on Tuesday, Mr. Klitschko folded his 6-foot-7 frame into a black Toyota Land Cruiser and sped across Kiev for meetings with foreign diplomats, driving past street demonstrations in support of Ms. Tymoshenko.

A too forceful stance might be a misstep, his political advisers said, fearing that too close an alliance with the Orange coalition could be a political liability.

He expressed a philosophy closer to that of another politically aware boxer, Mr. Ali: float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.

"The one who punches doesn't win," Mr. Klitschko said. "The one who dodges punches wins."

For his round of meetings on Tuesday, he wore a pinstriped charcoal suit.

In the elevator of his office building, secretaries swooned in his presence. His party, though, says he is more popular with men, particularly sports fans.

Before last week's shift in the political landscape here, Mr. Klitschko had been in Austria training for a match against Tomasz Adamek of Poland, scheduled for Sept. 10. Because tickets have already been sold, he said, the fight will go ahead.

In response to Ms. Tymoshenko's arrest, however, he will train part time in Kiev to remain close to the political turmoil here.

"Neither Tymoshenko nor Yanukovich are politicians of tomorrow," Mr. Klitschko said.

Asked what a boxer had to offer his country, he offered what he said was a paraphrase of the French film director Claude Lelouch. “Boxing is the cruelest sport, but the one that is most like life.”