

PRO-WESTERN PARTIES WIN UKRAINE'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS. WHAT'S NEXT?

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- **Ukraine goes to vote!**

On October 26th the first parliamentary elections since the downfall of Viktor Yanukovych were held in Ukraine and they were initially expected to strengthen President Petro Poroshenko's mandate to end the separatist conflict in the east of the country. This vote in Ukraine was meant to change the parliament dominated by supporters of former President Viktor Yanukovich. The ex-Ukrainian president was ousted in February because of his decision to steer away from the European path of Ukraine by not signing the Association Agreement with the EU at Vilnius in 2013 and reorienting towards the Russian Federation. While around 36 million people were registered to vote on Sunday, no voting was held in the Crimean Peninsula, which was annexed by Russia in March, neither in the separatist-held parts of Ukraine's easternmost regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Preliminary results for parliamentary elections in Ukraine indicate that three pro-European political parties crushed their opponents, affecting Russian interests in the country, of the 60 percent of the vote counted, a combined 54 percent went to pro-Western parties. Negotiations on forming a broad reformist coalition were expected to begin immediately. Extremely important to mention is that although anti-Russian sentiment has grown as Ukraine battles separatists in the east, considered to be supported by Kremlin, the Opposition Bloc, which drew its support from Yanukovich's once-ruling Party of Regions, organized itself pretty well and managed to capture about 10 percent of the vote. Of the pro-European parties, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk's Popular Front had 21.6 percent of the vote while President Petro Poroshenko's party had 21.4 percent. A new pro-European party based in western Ukraine was running third with 11 percent. The Fatherland party of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who has argued strongly for NATO membership and is likely to join a pro-Europe coalition, has received only 5.7 percent of the vote, thus showing that the Ukrainians do not stand so firmly by Tymoshenko although the political figure tried to gather popular support after Yanukovych was overthrown and expressed her deep Euro-Atlantic commitment.

After the announcement of the first preliminary polls in which pro-European parties seemed to have the lead, Ukraine's President, Petro Poroshenko praised the democratic elections for the Ukrainian Parliament and congratulated the people for supporting a reform-minded, pro-Ukrainian and pro-European majority and thus revealing the government's efforts to finally break free of Kremlin influence: „*The constitutional majority - more than three-quarters of the people who cast votes - strongly and irreversibly supported Ukraine's course towards Europe.*” The Ukrainian President called this result a „*a landslide vote of confidence from the people*” and prime-minister Yatsenyuk strongly supported this vision and underlined that now „*it's crystal clear that we have to reset the Parliament, the government that could together with the President to deliver real changes*” (The New York Times).

President Obama issued a statement congratulating the Ukrainian people for holding successful democratic elections, despite the important security challenges represented in some regions in the East by the pro-Russian militants who prevented many Ukrainian voters in Donetsk and Lugansk from exercising their democratic rights to participate in the national parliamentary elections and cast their vote. Barack Obama hailed Sunday's election as „*an important milestone in Ukraine's democratic development*” and John Kerry also joined the American President in congratulating Ukraine, stating that the US: „*appreciates Ukraine's commitment to an inclusive and transparent political process that strengthens national unity, essential to resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the country's other challenges*” (US Department of State). The United States concurs with the preliminary assessment delivered in Kyiv on behalf of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and echoed by other international monitors, that these elections were in line with Ukraine's international commitments. Commenting on the issue, the President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz stated: „*I congratulate Ukrainian people for their courage and democratic resolve. The journey that started with the democratic resistance in Maidan and led to the regeneration of institutions with the election of a new President and Parliament is now complete.*” (EU Reporter) The support of the United States and the EU who stand ready to work with Ukraine's President, the new government and the Verkhovna Rada to continue to promote reform and an accountable judiciary to fight corruption, pursue a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the East and oppose the occupation of Crimea is of great importance for the newly elected parliament who needs Euro-Atlantic support in order to continue this democratic, West-oriented path. The EU's support is essential for the state of mind of the Ukrainian people who voted for pro-western ideals and promises, and who now expect to see a new Ukraine capable of starting an important reform process to address the country's numerous problems.

- **Predictable reactions to elections - the geopolitical struggle continues?**

Although Russia has strongly criticized Ukraine's election campaign before the vote, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov openly stated that Moscow would recognize its outcome, even if this decision will significantly limit Russian efforts to maintain Kyiv in its political sphere of influence. But Moscow also wanted to underline for the Ukrainian political establishment that its current serious economic problems eclipse any other questions regarding the direction of its allegiances. „*It is very important that in Ukraine there will be a government that is occupied not with ... the pulling of Ukraine either to the West or to the East, but with the real problems that are facing the country,*” Lavrov told Russia's Life News. In the context of the intense geopolitical struggle between Kremlin and Kyiv regarding Ukraine's future political commitment, Lavrov said that Russia expects Petro Poroshenko to work for the formation of a „*constructive government*” that would solve social-economic problems, fulfil the terms of peace talks and „*not preserve the strong divisions within the Ukrainian society*”. „*We want Ukraine to enter a civilized path so that it becomes a country that is not hostile towards Russia and can pay for itself,*” stated Sergey Ivanov, Chief of Russia's presidential administration, adopting a moderate approach that underlines that Moscow does not want an instable and antagonist Ukraine at its borders but a moderate state with whom Kremlin might resume diplomatic and political negotiations.

The United States and the European nations are eager to end the worst violence on the Continent since the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s and to resolve the most dangerous dispute between

the West and Russia since the Cold War. But this will depend as much on Vladimir Putin as on Petro Poroshenko who will have to identify a way to solve the deadly conflict in eastern Ukraine and to restore the full control of the Ukrainian security forces over the entire territory in the East.

An overwhelming pro-Western majority might pose a challenge for Poroshenko as he tries to convince residents of the East that their interests are also a priority in Kiev primarily because these residents were denied the right to participate in the elections and express their opinion on the direction Ukraine should follow. Important antagonization with the central government can appear if the newly elected parliament won't be able to deliver its promises of restoring Ukraine's unity and integrity and its ability to protect its citizens in the entire country.

Now in Ukraine the expectations regarding the progress on domestic reforms started by the Ukrainian government and Parliament and supported by the Euro-Atlantic community are very high. On one hand, based on the fact that before the elections, there was a growing frustration among the Ukrainian people regarding the slow pace of economic reforms, if the pro-European coalition of parties will not efficiently deliver its promises and achieve tangible results (like reducing the level of corruption within the institutions), the trust in Poroshenko and the Ukrainian government will erode. On the other hand, the Western expectations are also very high and Kyiv has to accomplish the reforms it has proposed in order to continue benefiting from the support of the International Monetary Fund program and to prove that it deserves further financial assistance. The strong support received by the pro-European parties in these parliamentary elections might trigger an alarm in Kremlin who is perfectly aware of the opportunity it will have if the current government and parliament won't have the ability to accomplish the main needed reforms. Thus, if the Rada will not be able to create a stable coalition that could perform the task of restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and re-establish a certain state of social, economic and political stability, Kremlin will definitely try to get involved in the domestic Ukrainian politics in order to determine its border neighbour to abandon its Euro-Atlantic path. The recent elections may also offer the possibility for a renewed fighting in the East on short and medium term, where the rebels clearly expressed their ambition to further conquer Ukrainian territory and have criticized the cease-fire deal.

Poroshenko has laid out an ambitious agenda envisioning significant changes to Ukraine's police, justice and tax systems, defence sector and health care - all to be completed by 2020 and the recent victory in the parliamentary elections helped the Ukrainian people's morale giving them a strong hope that their country can overcome the difficulties it has faced since Crimea was occupied by the Russian Federation. An important part of the Ukrainian people who support the Euro-Atlantic approach of their government, perceive the recent elections as a victory and as a symbol that the EuroMaidan revolution was not in vain and that this opens a new chapter in the country's history, propelling Ukraine to a European future that many of them view as their destiny. Although Petro Poroshenko will certainly enjoy support from the new parliament in achieving its reform agenda, this will not help in dealing with the economic crisis in Ukraine, and the director of the Globalization Problems Institute, Mikhail Delyagin believes that the high unemployment rate, along the high inflation and huge foreign debt of Ukraine can not be so easily overcome: „*no elections will ever be able to bridge that gap*”. Russian-backed rebels firmly control key portions of the country's industrial heartland in the east. Moscow has also halted gas supplies to Ukraine in a row over the price and unpaid bills, causing alarm in the EU which gets a third of its gas needs from Russia, half of this via Ukraine.

International observers hailed Sunday's election as a step forward in building democratic institutions and Kent Harstedt, who oversaw the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe observer mission (OSCE), said the election offered voters a real choice and showed „*respect for fundamental freedoms*.". It will be extremely important to analyze if the majority of pro-Western parties that won the parliamentary elections will be able to form a solid coalition who could then militate for the ending of the war in eastern Ukraine.

To sum up, the political culture of Ukraine is notoriously fractious and with all the problems the country is currently facing from economic reform to fighting corruption and ending the war in the East it's extremely hard to anticipate what the outcome will be. In the follow-up of elections, new questions can be raised: Will these facts represent a fertile ground for disagreement among the main pro-European parties? Will they be able to formulate a coherent and comprehensive strategy to tackle all the problems Ukraine is facing and thus transforming the country into a Euro-Atlantic oriented, stable, democratic and consolidated country? Possible answers remain to be found in the following period.