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Guest writer May 28 10:49 6 comments



By Taras Kuzio in Dnipropetrovsk

Reported moves by Ukraine this week to leave the Moscow-led Commonwealth of Independent States merely underline the result of Sunday's elections: the country is now leaning overwhelmingly towards Europe.

Sunday's was the sixth presidential election to be held in Ukraine and, like the first one held in December 1991 that elected Leonid Kravchuk, produced a first-round victor, this time in the form of Petro Poroshenko.

The four-month long Euromaidan revolution, Russia's annexation of Crimea, separatism in Donbas and the weekend's elections have combined to produce four strategic outcomes for Ukraine.

First, **disintegration of the pro-Russian lobby** in Ukraine as represented by the Party of Regions, the Communist Party (KPU) and Crimean Russian nationalists. Mikhail Dobkin, the official presidential candidate of the Party of Regions, never inspired enthusiasm even among the party rank and file and received a miserable 2 per cent of the vote.

Six candidates with ties to the Party of Regions received a combined 8 per cent. The party's era – when Viktor Yanukovich received 44 and 48 per cent respectively in the 2004 and 2010 presidential elections and the Party of Regions won first place in the last three parliamentary elections – is over.

The KPU, which shared the same two bases of support (Donbas and Crimea) has long been a Party of Regions satellite. Its candidate, Piotr Symonenko, received 1 per cent of the vote.

A political vacuum has emerged in eastern Ukraine with the disintegration of the Party of Regions and the KPU. This, says Denis Semenov, a political consultant in Dnipropetrovsk, urgently needs filling before radicals and extremists can take hold. The myriad of centrist parties active in eastern Ukraine in the 1990s were swallowed up by the Party of Regions.

Second, **outright dominance of pro-Europeans**. Three of the leading four candidates were pro-European (Petro Poroshenko in first place, Yulia Tymoshenko in second and Anatolii Grytsenko in fourth) receiving a combined 75 per cent of the vote. If we add fifth place former Party of Regions deputy Serhiy Tihipko, the pro-European vote reaches 80 per cent.

Most previous presidential elections have gone to a second-round contest between pro-Russian and pro-Western candidates, as clearly seen in 2004 and 2010. Two factors made the difference this time: Yanukovich's criminal administration, which provoked the Euromaidan; and Russia's occupation of Crimea and its backing of the counter-revolution in Donbas, which prevented voting in the two most pro-Russian regions of Ukraine.

Third, while on Sunday anti-EU populist nationalists received massive support throughout Europe, garnering over 20 per cent of the vote in France, Austria, the UK and elsewhere, **this pattern was not evident in Ukraine**. Here, two nationalist candidates received a combined 2.3 per cent, showing how exaggerated is propaganda fanned by Moscow and its sycophants in the West claiming "fascists"

are in power in Kiev.

Ukraine's nationalists are different from many of their equivalents in the EU in that they are pro-European and not anti-Semitic. The Right Sector cooperates closely with Jewish-Ukrainian tycoon and Dnipropetrovsk governor Ihor Kolomoyskyy, who is financing four Dnepr and Donbas self-defence battalions.

Russian television propaganda reminiscent of the height of the Cold War reported that Dmytro Yarosh, the demonised leader of the Right Sector, had won the elections with Poroshenko coming second. Russian leaders and media (including Russia Today) live in an information bubble and parallel Soviet virtual world of their own making.

Fourth, the elections brought to light the **weakness and virtuality of political parties** in Ukraine. Despite years of support from Western foundations and governments, Ukraine is moving to a parliamentary system with no strong parties.

Timoshenko, having lost a presidential election for a second time, has an uncertain political future. She excelled when she had an enemy but Russia cannot replace Yanukovich as the arch villain. Timoshenko is too closely associated with her Fatherland party, which will harm its popularity. Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk, who has to introduce unpopular IMF and EU-inspired reforms, is likely to distance himself from Timoshenko.

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Solidarity and the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms, led respectively by Poroshenko and his ally Vitaliy Klitschko, elected mayor of Kyiv on Sunday, are top-down virtual parties with weak grassroots and regional structures. Meanwhile, the Party of Regions and the KPU are in deep crisis.

President Poroshenko's election landslide is a strategic breakthrough for Ukraine's European choice, to a far greater extent than the mandate given to Yushchenko after the Orange Revolution. Ukraine's new president inherits a largely blank political canvas. But he also faces two major economic-financial and separatist crises. With the main sponsor of Poroshenko's election campaign being gas tycoon Dmytro Firtash, who is awaiting deportation in Vienna to stand trial in the US, the president's potential Achilles heel will be his stance on corruption.

Following the abysmal failure of Yushchenko's presidency, Ukraine's robust civil society will be closely watching Poroshenko's every step and reminding him that people's Maidans are here to stay.

Taras Kuzio is a research associate at the Centre for Political and Regional Studies, Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta.

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