

In Ukraine, Four Steps to Democracy

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The Ukrainian parliament has wound up its life and set the stage for early parliamentary elections on Sept. 30, four years ahead of schedule. The elections could give Ukraine's revolution -- recently mired in crisis -- new momentum and have an impact elsewhere in the post-Soviet space.

President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich agreed to hold early elections after a tense two month stand-off, caused by Prime Minister Yanukovich's attempt to diminish the powers of the president and reverse many of Yushchenko's pro-reform and pro-Western policies. Yanukovich and his allies removed checks and balances by seeking a constitutional majority that threatened to sideline the president and create a powerful prime minister.

Yushchenko's decision to dissolve parliament and call for new elections demonstrated a resolve and decisiveness that had been often lacking in the past. Yushchenko had little choice. He had to reshuffle the deck or watch his authority -- and Ukraine's hopes for democratic reform and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures -- become progressively emasculated and diminished by Yanukovich.

Four steps are crucial if the crisis is to contribute to democratic consolidation in Ukraine:

First, all sides need to adhere to the compromise agreements that have been reached. These compromises should ensure that the checks and balances of the reformed parliamentary constitution are not again threatened by the pro-government coalition attempting to forcefully usurp monopoly power by seeking to establish a constitutional majority. Ukraine cannot continue to have periodic breakdowns and crises every six months. The nation's four crises since the Orange Revolution threaten to bring on Ukraine fatigue by Western governments giving up hope in Yushchenko's ability to promote democratic change in Ukraine.

Second, if Ukraine's 2007 elections are recognized as having been held in a "free and fair" manner by international organizations, as last year's elections were, the outcome should be accepted by all sides. Early elections will permit a new parliament to begin office with a democratic mandate built on a consensus on domestic and foreign policy goals enshrined in law. Yushchenko needs to act decisively following the elections by ensuring a coalition and government is in place, thereby not repeating last year's six-month post-election crisis.

Third, all sides in Ukraine need to adhere to the June 2005 recommendations of the Council of Europe's legal advisory board, the Venice Commission, and to join the president's constitutional commission. The Venice Commission recommended a range of improvements to the reforms in imperative mandates, inter-institutional relations, human rights and the constitutional court. These reforms, the Venice Commission said, would "improve the state of democracy and rule of law in their country."

Fourth, active Western support will be important. The crisis in Ukraine provides an opportunity to consolidate the democratic gains of the Orange Revolution through building democracy at home and integrating Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic community of democratic nations. If fair and free elections are carried out, the European Union should quickly move to negotiate a free trade agreement with Ukraine following its entry into the World Trade Organization. NATO should continue to hold out the offer of a membership action plan that Ukraine may find appealing.

The West has a strong political stake in Ukraine's success. Ukraine's evolution will have a significant impact on the Western regions of the post-Soviet space. If democracy can be consolidated in Ukraine, the pro-Western orientation of Georgia and Moldova will be strengthened, while Alyaksandr Lukashenko's autocratic rule in Belarus will be weakened. But if Ukraine's democratic reforms fail, the prospects for reform and closer ties to Euro-Atlantic structures in all three countries will be set back, perhaps irrevocably.

Russia's political evolution could also be affected. If Ukraine's Orange Revolution gains new momentum, it will be harder for Russian President Vladimir Putin's successor to continue the progressive backsliding on democratic reform that has been a hallmark of Putin's rule.

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