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Ukraine's Parliamentary Elections: What Next?

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On March 26, Ukraine's voters elected 450 members to the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, from an array of 45 parties and blocs. Charles Tanock, a British Member of the European Parliament (MEP), who oversaw the Parliament's election observers, said Ukraine had passed an important test of democracy in an "exemplary" fashion. Now the difficult task of forming a ruling coalition must begin. No matter who is the next prime minister, Washington should continue to support liberalization in Ukraine and the country's membership in the World Trade Organization and NATO.

The Emerging Coalition

The parliament now has one month from the publication of final results to assemble, two months to form a majority, and three months to nominate a cabinet.

In the newly elected Rada, the Party of Regions led by the pro-Moscow former Prime Minister Victor Yanukovich holds 186 seats; the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc, 129; the Our Ukraine Bloc (the party of President Viktor Yushchenko now led by Prime Minister Yuri Yekhanurov), 81; the Socialist Party of Ukraine, 33; and the Communist Party of Ukraine, 21.

Together with Socialists, Our Ukraine and the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc have enough seats to relegate Yanukovich's Regions Party to the opposition; however, it remains unclear whether Yushchenko and Tymoshenko will be able to overcome personal animosity and forge a coalition.

Tymoshenko, formerly President Yushchenko's ally and prime minister, has pushed publicly for a reunification of the Orange Coalition. President Yushchenko appears willing. Yushchenko may find the idea disagreeable, but it may be the only way for him to preserve his support in western Ukraine.

Tymoshenko said she is confident that "a democratic coalition will be born as we have a common vision for Ukraine's future and for the future coalition." That vision includes political and judicial reforms, membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), and fighting corruption. While she would likely strengthen relations with Euro-Atlantic organizations, Tymoshenko would almost certainly complicate Ukraine's relations with Moscow. She has pledged to annul Ukraine's controversial gas contract with Gazprom, signed in January of this year. The contract grants exclusive management of Russia-Ukraine gas sales to a non-transparent "RosUkrEnerg" company.

Yushchenko and Tymoshenko do have their ideological differences. Yushchenko is a former central banker committed to liberal economic reform who has pursued a strategic course toward integration with Europe and stable relations with Russia and all

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of Ukraine's neighbors. Tymoshenko is a populist who seeks to increase welfare spending and attack those businessmen who profited illicitly from the rule of former president Leonid Kuchma.

The Russian Connection

Yanukovich is expected to lead the biggest parliamentary faction and will likely play a key role in shaping Ukrainian politics—although the Orange Coalition, if revived, could keep him at bay. He has the support of the industrial magnates of eastern Ukraine and calls for closer ties with Moscow and to an end to Kiev's bid to join NATO. Still, Yanukovich does support European Union membership for Ukraine, but this is unlikely in the near future.

Although Moscow appeared calm during Ukraine's parliamentary-election campaign, while supporting Yanukovich, Russian President Vladimir Putin called for cooperation with Ukraine and qualified the election as a reflection of Ukrainians' support for good relations with Russia.

According to polls conducted by the Democratic Initiatives' Fund and the Social Monitoring Center, 42 percent of Ukrainians prefer closer ties to Russia, while only a quarter support NATO membership.

It will take weeks of negotiation before the Orange Revolution parties divide up governmental posts. Hopefully, the next Ukrainian government will not be characterized by the murky practices of the Kuchma Administration or the squabbling of the first year of Yushchenko's rule. Regardless of the color of the ruling coalition, it will face popular pressure to push through economic reform to boost growth and raise living standards.

Recommendations

The U.S. praised Ukraine's parliamentary elections even though they were a setback for Yushchenko's party. "The Ukrainian people have shown the world that they are committed to important ideals of economic freedom and democratic progress and open trade," said White House

spokesman Scott McClellan. "That lays the groundwork for a promising future." The EU also expressed satisfaction with the election process and proclaimed its support for Ukraine's ambition to continue working towards EU accession.

Now the difficult task of putting together a functioning cabinet begins. In the aftermath of the elections, it matters less who is going to be the prime minister than what policies the prime minister and his cabinet will execute. To aid Ukraine's painful post-Soviet transition, the Bush Administration should:

- Support free market economic policies, transparency, and the rule of law. The new cabinet must learn from the mistakes of the first year of the Yushchenko Administration and implement much-needed economic and administrative reforms, such as focusing on inflation. It is important that Ukrainian voters retain their trust in democratic government. Improving the rule of law and fighting corruption will be paramount tasks.
- Boost Ukraine's integration into global and Euro-Atlantic structures. Specific targets should include accession to the WTO, a plan for an associate membership in the European Union, and closer cooperation with NATO. While the Ukrainian electorate favors close ties with Russia, Ukraine's future and its economic interests lie primarily in the West.

Yushchenko's third cabinet must be more efficient, coherent, and transparent than its predecessors. Otherwise, the Ukrainian electorate could sour on the ideals of the Orange Revolution for years to come. It is not too late to restore the confidence that led Ukraine towards real democracy.

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