

Ukrainian voters repudiate Kravchuk's 'Party in Power'

by Konstantin George

Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk suffered a crushing defeat on April 10, in the second round of parliamentary elections which resulted in a strong voter turnout against what Ukrainians brand the "Party in Power." The anti-incumbent vote was split among a multitude of parties, creating no basis for any durable coalition in the new Parliament. This vacuum will create greater political instability in an already very dangerous situation. Moscow is mobilized to aggravate the crisis, as demonstrated by an election-eve provocation in the Ukrainian port city of Odessa.

The elections occur against the background of an economic crisis worse than even in Russia. By official estimates, 80% of Ukrainians are living below the poverty line. This has produced a highly politicized citizenry. In contrast to last year's national elections in Ukraine's two largest neighbors, Poland and Russia, the Ukrainian elections recorded a high voter turnout: 75% voter participation in the first round on March 27, and 66% in the April 10 second round. Only a minority of the incumbents from the old Parliament even dared to run again as candidates. The "Party in Power," in one form or another, will end up with well over 100 seats in the new Parliament, but its candidates were only able to win by running as "independents."

It is now all but definite that Kravchuk will have to call presidential elections for June 26, something which he has been desperately resisting.

Breakdown of the vote

The two largest groups in the new Parliament are the bloc of Communists, Socialists, and Agrarian Party, with at least 120 seats, followed by at least 65 seats for the moderate patriotic National Democratic Bloc, with the Rukh Party being its core. Added to this are 10 seats held by more extreme Ukrainian nationalists, thus giving the nationalists as a whole some 75 seats.

Western media have been trying to cite the election figures as proof of an "east-west" political polarization in Ukraine, pointing to a coming partition of the nation. According to this line, the nationalists dominate in western Ukraine and the communists in the east and south, which have large ethnic Russian populations. The communists did indeed sweep the mining and industrial regions of Donetsk

and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine on a platform of close economic integration with Russia; in referenda in these areas, voters have favored having dual Ukrainian-Russian citizenship. The communists won in the east through their promises that economic union with Russia would solve the desperate economic plight of the population. Voters voted "pro-Russian" out of economic desperation, not for ethnic reasons. This was the same ethnic Russian population which, in December 1991, voted 84% in favor of Ukrainian independence, in the belief that an independent Ukraine would be economically and socially a better place to live in than Russia. The demand for dual citizenship is also economically motivated, because with Russian citizenship one can cross the border and work in Russia for double the wage earned in Ukraine.

The nationalist vote was very strong in west Ukraine, but also in the central part of the nation, including the capital of Kiev.

In Kiev and the surrounding region, there are 23 election districts. Three candidates have been elected so far, and all are from Rukh. In the other 20 districts, the turnout was supposedly below 50%, necessitating a new run-off. In most of these districts, the current leading candidates are either nationalists or independents. The "low turnout" was produced through widespread invalidation of ballots. Because of voting irregularities in Kiev and other central regions, the official results do not do justice to exactly how well the Rukh-centered moderate nationalists did. For example, in one Kiev city district, the Rukh candidate, former Defense Minister Gen. Konstantin Morozov, was denied victory by manipulations which included padding his opponent's vote with votes from the local prison and local mental institution.

The single largest group in the new Parliament are the "independents," totalling well over 100. According to Rukh Chairman Vyacheslav Chornovil, "The independents are a swamp in which the two wings of Parliament [nationalist and communist] will fish for support." About 60 members of this group seem to be genuinely independent, or at least defy strict classification. The rest are "Party in Power" types, being either directors of state enterprises, heads of local administrations, or heads of collective farms. At least 20 industrial enterprise directors were elected, and 22 heads of collec-

tive farms, in the latter case through liberal pre-election food distribution.

The Odessa provocation

The latest crisis in Russian-Ukrainian relations began with a provocation that occurred on April 8, when, under orders originating from the Main Staff of the Russian Navy in Moscow, a Black Sea Fleet ship, the non-combatant *Cheleken*, stationed in Ukraine's Odessa naval base, defied Ukrainian authorities and illegally sailed from Odessa harbor to join the main part of the Black Sea Fleet under de facto Russian control in the Sevastopol naval base in the Crimea. The *Cheleken* was crammed with navigational equipment lifted from Ukrainian supplies at the reserve naval yard in Odessa. As it fled, it fired tracer bullets at pursuing Ukrainian small craft, which broke off the chase to avoid giving Moscow any pretext for military escalation.

The action was designed to provoke a strong Ukrainian response, which it did. On April 10—Election Day—a force of 120 Ukrainian paratroopers seized the Odessa reserve naval yard. Contrary to the version deliberately being circulated by the press service of the Black Sea Fleet and Moscow, no violence occurred. The three Russian officers who were reported as arrested and jailed, were only taken for questioning and then released, as confirmed by Col. Vyacheslav Voronkov, press spokesman for Ukraine's Odessa Military District. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry on April 11 called the Russian charges a "lie," designed to provoke "an armed conflict between Black Sea Fleet servicemen, Odessa port officials, border guards, and Ukraine's Navy." The ministry statement emphasized: "No violence was used, no shooting, no handcuffs, nothing. The Black Sea Fleet press center is deliberately creating instability between Russia and Ukraine."

The role of the Black Sea Fleet press in fueling tensions shows that such apparently local incidents are actually worked out by the Russian General Staff.

Ukraine denied Moscow's reports that 40 Ukrainian soldiers had "surrounded" another Odessa naval facility. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry stressed that the crisis had begun through the Russian seizure of the ship, which it called "an act of piracy," which created "a precedent of a sharp escalation in tensions which might have led to grave consequences."

Stoking separatism

What made the Odessa incident so significant was not only what happened, but where it happened. To date, major Russian Black Sea Fleet provocations had been confined to the fleet's main bases in Crimea, and linked to the Russian separatist movement there which has gained control of the region, threatening to detach it from Ukraine. The Odessa incident showed that Moscow was readying the geographical expansion of its separatist operations against the Ukrainian nation, from the Crimean peninsula to the Ukrainian "mainland."

The timing of this military provocation with the Ukrainian election was not coincidental, especially in view of the regional election picture. The communist victories were concentrated in the regions with large ethnic Russian populations: eastern Ukraine, Crimea, and the southern Black Sea littoral, including the Odessa region. In the easternmost regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, centers of mining and heavy industry, every seat was swept by the communists, as was also the case in Kherson region, bordering on Crimea, the original and strongest bastion of Moscow-steered Russian separatism. In Odessa region, the victories were divided mostly among the communists and their allies, and candidates of the local "Party in Power" nomenklatura.

These election results have given Moscow its first major operational capability to replicate, on parts of the Ukrainian "mainland," the sort of separatist operation it has developed to near fruition in Crimea.

Blackmail and concessions

The outcome of the Community of Independent States (CIS) heads of state meeting in Moscow on April 15 will be crucial in determining what the next moves from the Moscow side will be. Yeltsin will demand that Ukraine implement what he and Kravchuk had agreed to "in principle" at the end of September 1993, namely that Ukraine sell off its share of the Black Sea Fleet and bases to Russia, in exchange for Moscow writing off most the debt Ukraine owes for Russian gas deliveries. The clear threat is that Ukrainian rejection will lead to a new round of Russia shutting off gas supplies. Without Russian gas, Ukraine cannot survive.

Otherwise, Russia will push hard for Ukraine to join what it had agreed to in principle in July 1993, namely the Russian-led Economic Union of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. On this front, Moscow exercised its political control of Belarus to pull off a coup just before the CIS summit, adding to the pressure on Ukraine. On April 12, the prime ministers of Belarus and Russia, Vyacheslav Kebich and Viktor Chernomyrdin, signed a Treaty of Monetary Union between the two countries. The treaty provides that in July a currency union will come into effect, in which the Russian ruble will become the currency of both countries, and all monetary and credit policies will be in the hands of the Russian central bank. In short, Belarus will remain "independent" on paper, but in reality it will lose the last shreds of its sovereignty.

Such a coup cannot be repeated against Ukraine. However, Moscow will use Ukrainian resistance to joining an Economic Union on Russia's terms, to fashion a political separatist movement out of the protest vote that caused the communist sweep in East Ukraine. The crisis will worsen, as long as Ukraine remains hostage to Russian economic blackmail and western indifference. If the West would commit itself to policies that jointly develop both Russia and Ukraine as neighboring sovereign nations, then Russian policy could change.