



THOUSANDS OF UKRAINIANS REFUSE TO ACCEPT ELECTION RESULTS

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Thousands of people in the former Soviet republic of Ukraine are protesting Sunday's election after exit polls pointed to a victory for the opposition leader, but official results handed the presidency to the authoritarian prime minister.

The outcome of the political stalemate will decide the direction of this Slavic nation, rich in natural resources and comparable in size to Texas, which lies at the midpoint between Russia and Europe.

The current prime minister, Viktor Yanukovich, has sided with Russian President Vladimir Putin and favors a more centralized government, while the opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, has promised to reform the government and join trade and military alliances with western Europe and the United States. Two Viktors, but only one can be president.

Disputed election

With more than 99 percent of ballots counted, the government tally gave Prime Minister Yanukovich 49 percent of the vote to 46 percent for Yushchenko. However, several surveys of voters at polling places gave the opposition as much as an 11-point lead, according to the Associated Press.

An international election observer mission released a preliminary report Monday declaring that the election did not meet democratic standards. The findings included pressure on students to vote for the state's choice; widespread abuse of absentee voters, including some who were bused from region to region; the blocking of poll workers; suspiciously, even fantastically, high turnouts in regions that supported the prime minister; inaccurate voter lists and overt bias of state-financed news media.

U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar, who led an American mission to urge the departing president, Leonid Kuchma, to organize fair elections, said a "concerted and forceful program of election day fraud and abuse was enacted with either the leadership or cooperation of governmental authorities."

In addition, Yushchenko alleges that twice his political enemies tried to kill him and that he was poisoned in September. Indeed, his once photogenic face is now scarred by a mysterious illness. His detractors said he must have eaten some bad sushi.

History of independence and submission

Ukrainians have long walked a thin line between independent nationalism and submission to a larger entity. Ukraine was the center of the first Slavic state, Kievan Rus, the largest and most powerful state in Europe during the 10th and 11th centuries. When it was later incorporated into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the cultural and religious legacy of Kievan Rus laid the foundation for Ukrainian nationalism through subsequent eras.

Ukrainians overthrew Polish rule during the mid-17th century and managed to remain autonomous for well over 100 years. However, the Russian Empire absorbed most Ukrainian territory in the late 18th century. Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, Ukraine enjoyed a short-lived period of independence (1917-1920), but was reconquered and forced to endure a brutal Soviet rule that engineered two artificial, or man-made, famines (1921-22 and 1932-33) in which over 8 million died, according to the CIA Factbook.

In World War II, German and Soviet armies were responsible for some 7 million to 8 million more deaths. Following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Ukraine became independent, but not truly free -- the Soviet legacy of state control has been difficult to throw off. Most efforts to end state control have resulted in corruption, stalling efforts at economic reform, privatization and civil liberties.

The next five years

The current controversy will decide the fate of Ukraine for the next five-year presidential term.

Protests have increased every day since the election. Viktor Yushchenko told the crowd the people's will cannot be broken; the people's vote cannot be stolen. "You are the heroes. You are the heroes of Ukraine," he said, "You are carrying on your shoulders what will become -- maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe next year or in many years to come -- the future of Ukraine."

Members of the European Parliament warned that the election's legitimacy questions could split Ukraine into a north and west supporting Yushchenko, and a region in the east supporting the prime minister. Yushchenko has claimed the support of at least four Ukrainian cities, including the city council in Kiev, which rejected the election results.

Meanwhile, the protestors have dug in for the long haul, setting up tents and passing out blankets, foam mattresses, hats and winter coats. Posters were taped to the tents and to some of the protestors' jackets. They were messages to the police: "Don't shoot!"

By Leah Clapman, Online NewsHour