

Ukraine's Pivotal Parliamentary Poll

Statement by Stephen B. Nix
Eurasia Regional Director
International Republican Institute

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I wish to thank the members of the Helsinki Commission for conducting this briefing and for inviting me to discuss an extremely important part of the world. Europe and Eurasia remain of great strategic importance for the United States, and developments, particularly in the area of democracy, are critical to the United States' interests globally. Moreover, given the present challenges facing the Ukrainian people and their newly elected leadership – from rebuilding an economy devastated by corruption to a looming energy crisis and war in its eastern regions – this briefing is both timely and needed. Now, more than ever, the West must stand alongside Ukraine and assist it wherever possible in its efforts to bolster and consolidate its democracy, move itself closer to Europe, and defend itself against overt and inexcusable aggression from its neighbor to the east.

Again, I am honored to be here today to discuss the current situation in Ukraine, and I request that my remarks be entered into the record.

October 26 Parliamentary Elections

Enduring freezing temperatures, Ukrainians went to the polls on October 26 to elect a new parliament and empower the government in Kyiv to focus on implementing long-term reforms and respond to Russian aggression. Despite the violence in the east and the difficulty of reaching internally displaced persons across the country, an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians were able to vote and expressed their strong desire to continue their country's path toward European integration. With the exception of certain areas in Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts*, where Russian-supported militants used force and intimidation to prevent voting from taking place, and in Crimea, where Russia continues to illegally occupy Ukrainian territory, voters turned out in large numbers to register their strong support for the path to Europe which began on the Maidan.

The [International Republican Institute](#) (IRI) has monitored all presidential and parliamentary elections in independent Ukraine's history. Continuing this practice, the Institute fielded a short-term international election observation mission to [monitor the October 26 parliamentary elections](#). IRI's delegation was led by former U.S. ambassador to Poland, Victor Ashe and former prime minister of Slovakia, Iveta Radicova, with funding provided by the [United States Agency for International Development](#). Observers visited more than 150 polling stations across the country in Cherkasy, Chernihiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Lviv, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Ternopil, Volyn, Zaporizhia and Zhytomyr *oblasts*.

Moreover, IRI was the only American observer organization to witness voting in recently liberated Ukrainian territory in Donetsk *oblast*, specifically in Sloviansk. Observers were impressed by the patriotism and willingness of the residents who participated in the electoral process; and IRI especially commends the brave election commissions who were able to operate polling stations on Election Day under difficult circumstances in this recently contested territory, seeking to ensure that as many voters as possible were able to vote as part of a united Ukraine.

The parliamentary elections were well-administered nationwide, and IRI's delegation commends polling officials for their professionalism and organization throughout the

process. Officials were knowledgeable and approached their jobs seriously, working long hours without breaks to ensure that the election was free, fair and democratic. IRI observers reported only minor non-systemic irregularities and none that would affect the outcome of the election. In sharp contrast with elections before 2014, observers did not witness widespread abuse of administrative resources during the campaign or manipulation of the national voter registry. Observers saw continued improvement in the voter lists and voters were able to easily receive a ballot after providing proof of identification. IRI's delegation praised the Central Election Commission for its administration of the election and its dedication to an open and transparent process.

The elections illustrate Ukrainians' resounding choice to continue along the path of European integration. The vast majority of parliamentarians elected, both on the party list and majoritarian ballots, support continuing to move Ukraine closer to Europe. Also of note, for the first time in almost 100 years, the Communist Party of Ukraine did not receive enough votes to cross the five percent threshold to enter parliament. President Poroshenko should now have the support he needs in parliament to implement the reforms the Ukrainian people have demanded.

Post-Election Challenges

Despite the successful parliamentary elections, several significant challenges remain. The first, and most critical, are threats to Ukraine's territorial integrity by its Russian neighbor. Russia and Russia-backed militants have chosen to ignore the Minsk peace accord signed in September. Continuously seeking to seize additional territory in eastern Ukraine, they have launched daily attacks on Ukrainian positions and checkpoints, including a strategically important airport in Donetsk. Recently, militants have launched an offensive along the Azov Sea, threatening the city of Mariupol, which houses Ukraine's government in exile from Donetsk city. More than 100 Ukrainian servicemen have lost their lives since the so-called peace agreement was signed.

With much attention focused on the conflict in eastern Ukraine, Russia's illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula has often been overlooked by the international community. IRI president Ambassador Mark Green (ret.) raised the issue of Crimea and the plight of the Crimean Tatar people in his [testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in June](#). The Crimean Tatars are indigenous people of Crimea. They were brutally deported from their homeland under Stalin's rule and only began to return after Ukraine became independent in 1991, able to live and worship freely under the Ukrainian government. Russia's illegal March invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea unequivocally violated international law and norms.

Since March, conditions on the peninsula have significantly deteriorated for supporters of Ukrainian unity and especially for Crimean Tatars. Crimean residents have been forced to renounce their Ukrainian citizenship and to take Russian citizenship. In the last few months, they have become the target of Russian persecution. According to Mustafa Dzhamilov (leader of the Crimean Tatar people) as of today, 18 Crimean Tatars are missing, many of whom were kidnapped in broad daylight.

Crimean Tatars have also had their homes illegally searched and property confiscated, and their centers and places of worship raided and seized. Numerous criminal cases have been opened against them. Moreover, Crimean Tatar newspapers and the TV channel ATR have been accused of “extremism.” The self-proclaimed prime minister of Crimea, Sergei Aksenov, has warned that failure to recognize the new government would result in expulsion from the peninsula. This threat has been carried out against several Tatar leaders including Mustafa Dzhamiliev and Rafat Chubarov.

These threats to Ukraine’s territory and its people are real, and the international community should support President Poroshenko in his efforts to resolve this conflict. Ukraine will not be able to pursue the reforms needed to move closer to Europe while its territory is under siege by foreign actors. A peaceful and whole Ukraine is of paramount strategic importance and must be a priority for the West.

In addition to the existential threat Ukraine faces from Russia, the new government must also work quickly to address domestic issues: namely, a faltering economy, widespread corruption and a looming energy crisis. With elections now over, the work of the Ukrainian government must now begin. Voters expect the government to undertake reforms that the public demanded and that political parties promised in their campaigns. It will not be easy, especially given the unprecedented challenges from internal and external threats that the president and new parliament now face. The window to address these issues is small and the time to be able to do so short.

[IRI polling in Ukraine](#) reflects the clear desires of Ukrainians: peace and stability are at the top of the list, followed by unemployment and corruption. With a significant number of pro-reform parliamentarians elected in October and with the vast majority of Ukrainians ready to make short-term sacrifices for the sake of a better future, the government must seize this opportunity to undertake wide-ranging economic, judicial and electoral reforms. The economy is teetering on the verge of collapse as a result of years of abuse and corruption, exacerbated by the Russian ban on Ukrainian exports and a looming energy crisis. As the country braces for gas shortages ahead of a long winter, the Ukrainian economy shows little sign of improvement, with the *hryvnia* hitting a record low. The months ahead are likely to be very difficult for the Ukrainian people. Therefore, President Poroshenko and the newly-elected parliament must move quickly to undertake reforms.

Europe and the United States cannot let the Ukrainian government face these challenges alone. The Ukrainian people have repeatedly demonstrated their strong desire to see their country on a democratic and peaceful path toward Europe. The West should provide the president and parliament with the economic, technical and other assistance to ensure that Ukraine realizes its aspirations in the face of overt Russian aggression.

At IRI, we are working to help Ukraine consolidate its democracy. IRI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that seeks to encourage democracy in places where it is absent, help democracy become more effective where it is in danger, and share best practices where democracy is flourishing. While Ukraine’s future is obviously up to Ukrainians, at

IRI, we believe the community of Western democracies can play an indispensable role in providing tools and assistance that can help Ukraine continue along its democratic path.

As part of IRI's longstanding national and regional public opinion survey program, IRI will continue to provide important data on key issues to parliament and executive branch leadership to assist them in framing legislative and ministerial reform agendas. The Institute will also continue its regional governance work to respond to the need for knowledge and skills across Ukraine's local governments to address these challenges. IRI will soon open a southern and eastern Ukraine training center in Dnipropetrovsk, where it will train young political and civic activists on how to effectively engage in political processes. IRI will focus its efforts on young locally elected officials from southern and eastern Ukraine to enhance their capacity to undertake reforms at the local level by providing trainings on transparency, communication and councilmember rights and responsibilities.

In addition, IRI piloted an innovative program in 2011 to enhance linkages between political parties and civil society organizations (CSO) at the municipal level. Typically in Ukraine, political parties and CSOs do not cooperate with each other outside of election cycles. IRI's program has sought to facilitate collaboration between the two, by highlighting the mutually beneficial results of cooperation, such as solving local problems.

Although Russian propaganda would have us believe that Ukrainians are divided and engaged in a bitter civil war, Ukrainians have never been more united. Nevertheless, IRI also recognizes that more must be done to promote and enhance linkages between Ukrainians. For several years now, IRI has been working to strengthen relationships between officials and activists from different parts of the country. Among many study trips conducted thus far, IRI has brought together council members from regions bordering Russia to far western Ukraine to share best practices in democratic governance and to create interregional networks of reform-oriented leaders. In the process, both sides confront stereotypes of the other, realizing that the stereotypes are not accurate and too frequently used as political tools.

Ukraine will always have a special relationship with Russia and its people, with its language, culture and historical ties. But through the Maidan and now the May and October elections, the people have spoken very loudly – Ukrainians of all backgrounds, ages and faiths – that they want to decide their own future, a future with greater freedom, greater democracy and closer ties to Europe. It is at this critical time in Ukraine's further democratic development that we must stand with our Ukrainian friends and do all we can to support them in their efforts to further consolidate democratic processes in their country.