

Fraud, cancellations, mass abstention mark Ukrainian local elections

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27 October 2015

The first round of voting for mayors, regional legislatures and city council members held Sunday in Ukraine was marked by widespread accusations of fraud and intimidation and low voter turnout. Voting was cancelled at the last minute in the eastern cities of Mariupol, Krasnoarmisk and Svatove.

Elections were not held in the parts of Donetsk and Luhansk that remain under the control of Russian-backed separatists, as well as in the government-controlled cities of Avdiyivka, Maryinka, Artemivsk and Kostiantynivka.

According to the Russian news service Interfax, nationwide voter turnout was a low 46.6 percent. The highest rates of voter participation were in the western districts of Ternopil and Lviv, where 56 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. The lowest participation was in the disputed eastern districts of Donetsk and Luhansk, where 32 percent and 35 percent of eligible voters, respectively, cast ballots.

The elections were held approximately eight months after the signing of a cease fire agreement that has essentially halted fighting between Kiev-backed forces and Russian-backed separatists in the eastern Donbass region.

Fighting broke out last year shortly after a US- and EU-backed coup, spearheaded by fascist forces, ousted pro-Russian President Victor Yanukovych. Since Kiev launched its offensive against the separatists in April of last year, approximately 6,000 Ukrainians have been killed and about two million people have been displaced.

While final first round election results are not expected to be released until next week, exit polls indicated that the results were largely split between the Ukrainian-speaking west and Russian-speaking east.

The governing coalition headed by President Petro

Poroshenko is set to maintain control in the west and center of the country. Vitali Klitschko, a close ally of Poroshenko, won reelection as mayor of the capital city, Kiev.

The exit polls indicate that the pro-Russian Opposition Bloc, which emerged from the collapse of the pro-Russian Party of Regions following the coup, was set to consolidate control in the east. Hennadiy Kernes, a former backer of Yanukovych, was reelected mayor of Kharkov, the country's second largest city, in a landslide vote.

Voting in Mariupol was cancelled just 12 hours before polls were set to open, disenfranchising voters in the city of nearly 500,000 people. Allies of Poroshenko claimed they had discovered flaws in the ballots and had them destroyed the night before the vote, leaving no time for new ballots to be printed.

No date has been set for local elections to take place in Mariupol, though Poroshenko indicated they could be held before the end of the year, with the parliament's approval.

Pre-election polls had indicated that the Opposition Bloc would easily win control of the city, while Poroshenko's bloc polled a distant second.

Election officials refused to accept the ballots that had been printed by a company owned by billionaire oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's wealthiest individual and the main benefactor of the Opposition Bloc. Akhmetov was accused of seeking to tamper with the vote by printing more ballots than was necessary.

The Obama administration was quick to fix its stamp of approval on the conduct and outcome of the elections. Geoffrey Pyatt, the US ambassador to Ukraine, hailed the decision to cancel the vote in Mariupol as expressing Kiev's "commitment to ensuring that the people of Mariupol--like all citizens

of Ukraine--are able to make their own democratic choice.”

On Monday, US Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker flew to Kiev, where she announced that the US government would move forward with a third \$1 billion loan to the regime as soon as November. At a joint press conference with Poroshenko, Pritzker promised that the US government and American businesses would continue to be Ukraine’s “partner on the road to economic reform.”

While they expressed concern over numerous campaign law violations, including vote-buying, threats and physical attacks on politicians and election campaign workers, as well as the domination of the election by a handful of billionaire oligarchs, observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also approved the conduct of the voting.

In a statement released on Sunday, the organization concluded that the elections had been “competitive, well organized overall, and the campaign generally showed respect for the democratic process.”



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