

Poll Will Not Split Ukraine, Ex-Speaker Says

By [Rostislav Khotin](#)

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KIEV — Ukraine's second ranking political figure said Tuesday that inconclusive elections would not split the former Soviet republic along ideological lines.

Outgoing parliament speaker Ivan Plyushch dismissed suggestions that a threat to the country's future was posed by last Sunday's first round voting, which exposed a growing gap between nationalist western and pro-Russian eastern Ukraine.

"There is no such thing as western or eastern Ukraine," Plyushch said in his office in parliament. "Someone is merely trying very hard to hinder the process of reform and democratization."

"The easiest way to do this is encourage a clash between east and west. But this has no future and will not work."

Sunday's first round returned 49 of parliament's 450 members outright, far more than had been predicted by opinion polls.

Turnout of 75 percent exceeded all expectations given two years of plunging living standards and palpable revulsion with the outgoing Soviet-era parliament dominated by old-style communists.

Ironically the 14 communists elected to parliament represented the largest single faction returned in Sunday's first round, but their leader was quick to stress his party's disdain for the old order.

"Voting for communists means rejecting the current state of affairs," said party leader Pyotr Simonenko by telephone Monday from Donetsk, in the heart of the Donbass coal field in pro-Russian eastern Ukraine, where the communist platform of closer links with Russia was particularly popular with the electorate.

Communists were not alone in advocating closer links with Ukraine's eastern neighbor. Voters in two districts also backed by wide margins plebiscites calling for closer integration with Moscow, a federal state structure and equal status for the Russian language alongside Ukrainian.

In Crimea, run by a Russian nationalist president since January, voters backed an "opinion poll" calling for greater devolution of powers.

But in a move that came as a blow to the peninsula's hopes for more autonomy, the United States on Monday stressed that it considered the Crimean peninsula part of Ukraine.

"We don't have a different view of Crimea than the one that we've stated often here," McCurry told reporters, citing U.S. "concern about the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea."

He said the Crimea initiative approved in Sunday's polls "didn't have any legal bearing or any legal standing under the constitution of Ukraine."

Outgoing parliament chairman Plyushch, who has frequently challenged Kravchuk's authority and is seen as one of several challengers to Kravchuk in presidential elections planned for June, was easily elected in Chernihiv district near the Russian border.

Before the first round of the poll, Kravchuk had called for a postponement of the presidential poll and suggested he could ask for more powers if Ukraine's cumbersome electoral law left one-third of the parliament's seats vacant. He has since made no comment and aides said he planned no statements.

"I am convinced that presidential elections will be held," Plyushch said.

"But what sort of elections will take place will depend on how soon the new parliament forms a government and how soon it resolves overall questions of interest to Ukraine.

"We need to reform executive power to place it in one pair of hands," Plyushch continued. "Who will head executive power, the prime minister or president? Then we shall see what kind of presidential elections will take place."

The results demonstrated that Ukrainians retain at least some faith in their post-Soviet institutions -- in apparent contrast to voters in neighboring Russia, where turnout in December's election was only about 53 percent.

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