

Ukrainian Local Elections Test Yanukovych's Standing

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KIEV — Ukraine voted on Sunday for local councils and mayors in elections that should provide the first real clues to President Viktor Yanukovych's standing at home since his election last February.

The Party of the Regions, backbone of the parliamentary majority supporting Yanukovych, is taking on a host of rival parties for local councils that will be responsible for implementing his economic reform policies.

But, in a hark back to the fraught runoff last February in which Yanukovych beat former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, the air was thick with accusations of imminent vote-rigging.

Tymoshenko herself, who heads the Fatherland party and remains Yanukovych's bitter foe, said on the eve of the vote: "There is no limit to what these people will do. They will falsify the vote. You can depend on it."

Iryna Bekeshkina of the Democratic Initiatives political research foundation said the elections

would be the ruling party's first test of democracy. "But the danger these elections represent for democracy is very high," she said.

Some opposition parties say thousands of forged ballot papers have turned up in Kharkiv, in eastern Ukraine, as well as in other parts of the country.

They also accuse the Party of the Regions of exploiting an unfair advantage by using the resources of the ruling administration — such as official vehicles — to mobilize voters on their side.

"There will be a big temptation for the new authorities to use administrative resources. This is a big danger for future elections," Bekeshkina said.

The Party of the Regions is strong in the highly populated Russian-speaking east, which forms the president's power base, and in Crimea. Tymoshenko is strong in the Ukrainian-speaking west and center.

Some opinion polls showed that support for the Party of the Regions has dipped since Yanukovich took power.

Commentators say a failure to deliver on campaign pledges, such as improving the local business climate by granting tax breaks to small businesses, has played a part in this.

There is also widespread resentment at a big hike in domestic gas prices — at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund — and the government's pension reform plans, which will raise the retirement age to 65 years for men and women.

Tymoshenko's party is not the only one girding for a fight with the Party of the Regions.

The Communists have also leveled charges of "dirty tricks" against the party. A fierce battle for votes was in prospect in Crimea, where the two sides are disputing seats in the peninsula's autonomous parliament.

Andriy, a 46-year-old engineer in the Crimean town of Simferopol, complained of high charges for housing utilities, poor roads and decrepit buildings.

"I am against the Party of the Regions wanting to seize power here and put into Crimea a single leading man," he said in a reference to Yanukovich. "They've been in power in Crimea for almost 10 years, and the situation is not getting any better."

In the eastern city of Donetsk, most voiced support for the Party of the Regions. "Since Yanukovich became president, things have got better at work and we are taking on young people. The most important thing for me is that there is work and a wage so as to be able to get by," said Viktor Kiriyevisky, a 51-year-old tiler.

Tatyana Kozak, a 70-year-old pensioner in Donetsk, expressed nostalgia for the Soviet period and was voting communist. "I worked for 50 years, and I get 720 hryvna [\$90] a month. It would be better with the Communists."

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