

Ukrainian President's Party Set for Election Win

By [The Moscow Times](#)

October 29, 2012



Boxer Vitaly Klitschko, head of the UDAR (punch) party, speaking Sunday. **Efrem Lukatsky**

The party of Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich was on course Monday to secure a parliamentary majority, but international monitors said flaws in the conduct of the election meant the country had taken a "step backwards."

Exit polls and first results from Sunday's vote showed that with help from longtime allies, Yanukovich's Party of the Regions would win more than half the seats in the 450-member assembly after boosting public sector wages and welfare handouts to win over disillusioned voters in its traditional power bases.

The ruling party will face a revitalized opposition boosted by resurgent nationalists and a liberal party led by boxing champion Vitaly Klitschko.

But a team from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which sent more

than 600 observers to monitor the election, criticized the way it had been conducted.

"The elections were characterized by the lack of a level playing field caused primarily by the abuse of administrative resources, lack of transparency of campaign and party financing and lack of balanced media coverage," the OSCE mission said in a statement.

"Certain aspects of the pre-election period constituted a step backwards compared with recent national elections," it said, a reference to Yanukovich's election in February 2010, which was judged fair by the West.

It said the inability of jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko to run as a candidate had also "negatively affected" the election process.

Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, who said Sunday night that the Regions' apparent victory showed confidence in Yanukovich's policies, brushed off criticism of the poll. He told a separate Russian-led observer mission that criticizing the vote would "be like calling white black."

Victory for the pro-business Regions party, which represents the interests of the wealthy industrialists bankrolling it, will underpin the leadership of the president, who comes up for re-election in the former Soviet republic in 2015.

His rule since he took office has been marked by an accumulation of presidential powers and tension with the West over the imprisonment of Tymoshenko, a former prime minister.

Balloting is in two parts, with half the seats allotted to individual candidates winning local district polls and half to parties according to their share of the vote nationally.

Partial results from the Central Election Commission showed the Regions winning 118 constituencies. Combined with the party's projected national vote totals, the reported results would give the party 205 seats. With support from allies such as the communists and independents, the Party of the Regions appears certain to reach the 226 seats needed to form a majority.

The main united opposition bloc, which includes Tymoshenko's Batkivshchyna (Fatherland), was in second place on the party-list vote and leading in 36 individual districts.

The Party of the Regions appeared to have fared well despite the government's unpopularity and the authoritarian image of Yanukovich, which does not sell well across the country.

Its success was due in part to increased state handouts and promises to enhance the status of the Russian language, an important pledge for Russian-speaking voters in the president's eastern power base, who fear being at a disadvantage to native speakers of Ukrainian.

The introduction of constituency voting also favored Regions candidates, who could draw on state resources.

The biggest surprise came from the nationalist Svoboda (Freedom) party which, according to partial results, won almost 9 percent in the party-list voting. This means it will have significant representation in parliament for the first time.

The unexpectedly strong showing by Svoboda — which is based in the Ukrainian-speaking west, pursues a strongly Ukrainian nationalist agenda and opposes the Regions' attempts to promote the use of Russian — bolstered the ranks of an opposition weakened by the jailing of Tymoshenko.

The other new opposition wild card in parliament will be held by UDAR, an acronym meaning "punch." Led by Klitschko, the party was in fourth place behind the Regions, the Communists and the opposition bloc that includes Batkivshchyna.

Many voters made it clear they were frustrated with the performance of the established political parties over the past few years. Corruption is a big concern in Ukraine, and many of the 46 million Ukrainians face economic hardship.

Tymoshenko was sentenced to seven years in prison last year for abuse of office over a 2009 gas deal with Russia that she made when she was prime minister. The Yanukovich government says the agreement saddled Ukraine with an enormous price for gas supplies.

Ukraine is more isolated politically on the international stage than it has been in years. It is at odds with the United States and EU over Tymoshenko and does not see eye to eye with Moscow, which has turned a deaf ear to Kiev's calls for cheaper gas.

The government is also blamed for not stamping out corruption and has backed off from painful reforms that could secure much-needed lending from the International Monetary Fund to shore up the economy.

Klitschko, the WBC heavyweight champion, will now enter parliament at the head of his new party and could be a towering force in the assembly. He has been critical of the corruption and cronyism under Yanukovich.

He says his party will team up with Arseny Yatsenyuk, who leads the united opposition in Tymoshenko's absence, and with other opposition groups including Svoboda, though his refusal to join a pre-election coalition engendered suspicion. He ruled out any pact with the Regions.

"We do not foresee any joint work with the Party of the Regions and its communist satellite," he said. "We are ready to work with those political parties that propose a European path of development."

Svoboda chief Oleh Tyahnybok, a 43-year-old surgeon, promised to stick by a pre-election agreement and work with Yatsenyuk and other opposition leaders in parliament. He also pressed Klitschko to join the united opposition formally.

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