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With a Strong Democracy, Ukraine Is Not Russia

By James Brooke

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President Vladimir Putin is suffering back pain and is canceling foreign trips and his annual televised call-in show. He may also be suffering from foreign policy headaches. Multiparty democracy is alive and well in the most unexpected of places: Russia's neighboring countries to the south.

The key to democracy is decision by the voters. Any American who tells you he knows who will win the U.S. presidential vote Tuesday is either lying or blindly partisan. Opinion polls indicate a tight race.

On Oct. 1, foreign reporters flew into Tbilisi, Georgia, for the parliamentary elections. According to common wisdom, and the polls, the election would be won by the party of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. Then, the thinking went, the Georgians would jump up and down about fraud, things would quiet down, and Saakashvili would sail on to become a super-empowered prime minister. But Georgian voters thought otherwise. In an

unexpected turn of events, voters migrated heavily to the opposition party of Bizdina Ivanishvili. Ivanisvhili's supporters won, Saakashvili conceded defeat, and last week, Ivanishvili became the new prime minister of Georgia.

Last week, a similar scenario played out in Ukraine. The government of President Viktor Yanukovych held its midterm parliamentary elections. Three opposition parties got total of 50 percent of vote. It is unclear how many years we have to wait to see this in Russia.

Going into the Oct. 28 vote, analysts predicted the worst, saying the government had done its best to tilt the vote in its favor. And the tilt was pretty pronounced.

According to one count, 41 opposition candidates were physically attacked or harassed by government officials. The most prominent opposition leader, Yulia Tymoshenko, was in jail, held largely incommunicado. In the three months prior to the election, TVi, the nation's only independent television channel, was dropped from cable packages offered to 6 million Ukrainians.

On the spending side, the government pumped so much money into social spending that the budget deficit tripled during the first nine month of this year. In addition, the government postponed two unpopular moves: allowing the national currency, the hryvnia, to devalue and household gas prices to rise.

Then there was the little trick of confusing voters with clone parties. At one polling station I visited, there were three green parties. Two of them featured photos of candidates who looked like they had been recruited from the middle management of the post office: solemn, middle-aged men in coats and ties. The third, presumably the real Green Party, had women and younger men in edgy haircuts. In total, there were 45 clone candidates across the country.

My VOA Ukrainian Service colleague Oksana Lihostova told me she intended to vote for an opposition candidate, Sergei Teriokhin. But on filling out the ballot, she marked the space for Andrei Teriokhin, a pro-government candidate, only because his name appeared first on the ballot since A comes before S. She e-mailed me: "When I was leaving the station, I saw on the wall a picture of another Teriokhin. Only then did I realize that I had been deceived."

These kinds of election games leave a bad taste in people's mouths. They prompted Brussels and Washington to give the election poor grades. On Oct. 29, the U.S. State Department called the election "a step backward." The European observer mission said that "democratic progress appears to have reversed in the Ukraine."

But as foreign observers packed their bags, Ukrainian poll watchers and vote counters in contested races were, in some cases, wrestling over control of boxes with ballots and, in other cases, sleeping with their arms around them. By the end of the week, the dust had cleared, and OPORA, the most respected election watchdog group, declared that the final results for the five big parties varied from its own parallel vote counts by maximums of only 1 percentage point.

For all the money spent, Yanukovych's Party of the Regions won only 30 percent of the vote. His parliamentary delegation will be 186, nine seats smaller than it was going into the election. His allies, the Communists, increased their delegation to 32. But huffy about coming

in fourth out of five, they are threatening not to work with the president.

Tymoshenko's Fatherland party reversed its slide, adding six new seats for a total of 104. Yanukovych's ham-handed handling of the opposition leader can be thanked for her political resurrection. Voters wiped out the party of Viktor Yushchenko, the former president, who has been seen as soft on his successor. In its place, there are two new opposition parties, Svoboda and UDAR, the pro-European party lead by heavyweight boxer Vitaly Klitschko.

On one side, Yanukovych's party controls 41 percent of parliamentary seats. On the other side, the opposition will control 40 percent. Yanukovych will fashion a working majority only by luring back the Communists and a large number of independents. Gone are his October dreams of a two-thirds majority that would allow him to change the Constitution.

This brings us back to Putin's foreign policy headaches. For two years, he alternately cajoled and threatened Yanukovych, trying to bring Ukraine into a Moscow-dominated customs union, a Soviet Union light. Now, it is clear that a majority of Ukrainian voters do not want that. The three opposition parties that collectively received half the vote are all pro-Western, favoring a free-trade treaty with the European Union.

The sour-grapes mood is so strong in Yanukovych circles in Ukraine today that some are charging that Alexander Lebedev, a Russian billionaire opposed to Putin, subsidized Ukraine's opposition. Instead of looking at conspiracies, perhaps it might be best to go back to the basics of democracy: Listen to the voters.

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