

Ukrainian Election Front-Runner Poroshenko Pledges Closer Ties to EU

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Ukrainian tycoon and presidential election candidate Petro Poroshenko (L) talks to Russian former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky (R), as former Ukrainian Interior Minister Yuriy Lutsenko stands nearby.

The front-runner for Ukraine's presidency, Petro Poroshenko, said that Ukraine will begin negotiations for joining the European Union immediately after the May 25 presidential election, and will phase out Russian natural gas imports in about a year.

"Ukraine will be in the EU — I promise you that," Poroshenko said when campaigning Sunday in the western Ternopil region. The time of accession would depend on "how quickly we conduct reforms, how quickly we change the country," he said.

Poroshenko, who has been endorsed by boxing champion and politician Vitali Klitschko, has the support of 48.4 percent of decided voters, just short of the absolute majority required to win in the first round of voting and avoid a runoff election, a joint survey released last week

by a group of Ukrainian pollsters indicated.

Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko came in a distant second, with the support of 14 percent of decided voters, followed by Serhiy Tihipko with 7.4 percent, according to the poll by the SOCIS Center for Social and Marketing Research, Kiev International Institute of Sociology, Rating Sociological Group and Razumkov Center.

Poroshenko also confirmed that Ukraine has reached an agreement with Slovakia on reversing the flow of natural gas from Central Europe, adding that Ukraine will stop using Russian supplies in about a year.

"I am sure that 2015 will be the last year when Ukraine buys gas from Russia. We don't need that gas, we can live without it," he said. "The real Ukrainian administration must demonstrate its independence — not only politically, but also economically."

Ukraine is electing a new president to replace its ousted Moscow-backed leader, Viktor Yanukovich, who has fled to Russia after months of street protests that were sparked by his abrupt abandonment, under pressure from Moscow, of a planned association deal with the EU.

The Slovak Economic Ministry has said that the deal on opening limited capacity reverse gas flow will be signed Monday, Reuters reported.

Ukraine has been trying to secure alternative supplies after Russia annexed Crimea last month, and Russia's Gazprom nearly doubled gas prices to levels Ukraine refuses to pay.

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