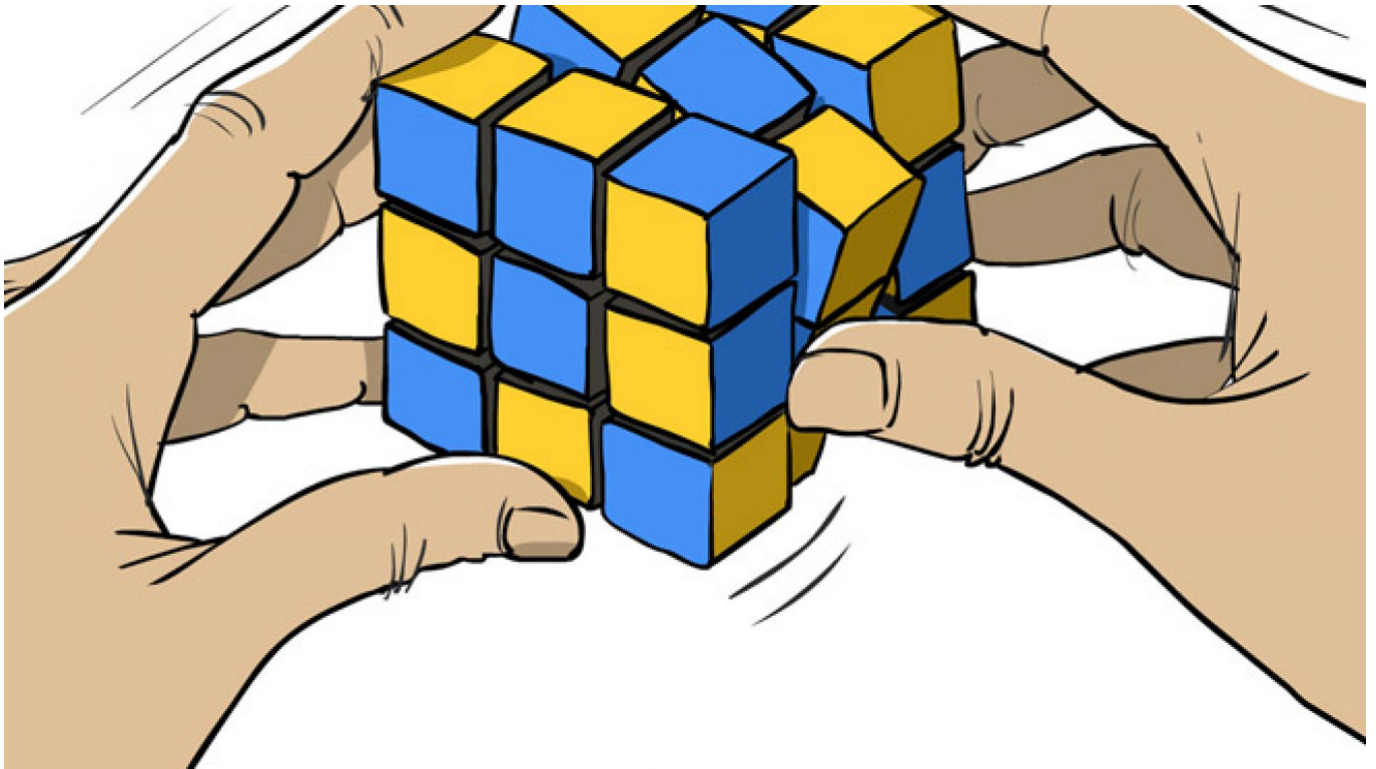


Ukraine Needs a Firm Hand to Stay Afloat

By [Georgy Bovt](#)

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The Ukrainian presidential elections were held under the most turbulent conditions in the country's short history. They were supposed to have marked a turning point in the unfolding Ukrainian drama and help the country begin its gradual emergence from the political and economic crisis.

But will they? Ukrainian President-elect Petro Poroshenko scored a landslide victory in the first round of voting. However, even overwhelming voter support will not guarantee him an easy time as president or guarantee that Ukraine will rapidly overcome the current crisis. Although Poroshenko's election shows that Ukrainians want unity and peace, anti-Russian sentiment, a divided parliament and cash-strapped economy mean that strong leadership is needed.

Although Poroshenko's election shows that Ukrainians

want unity and peace, that will be difficult to achieve given anti-Russian sentiment, a divided parliament, and a cash-strapped economy.

A couple of months ago, it might have come as a surprise that Poroshenko could defeat former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko by such a large margin, but today it does not seem strange at all. Tymoshenko ran her campaign on anti-Russian slogans and calls for radicalizing the country. Now the defeated Tymoshenko will push hard for a referendum on NATO membership, calling it an "urgent" necessity. It was also very telling that Ukrainian nationalists Dmytro Yarosh and Oleh Tyahnybok — whom Kremlin propaganda used as bogeymen to scare Russian schoolchildren — received only a negligible number of votes. By voting for Poroshenko, however, the majority of Ukrainians indicated that they want to end the country's internal squabbling and prevent a war with Russia.

If it were any other country but crisis-torn Ukraine, observers might have cast doubt on the legitimacy of such elections.

Clashes between government troops and armed separatists prevented free access to polling places for the 4.5 million voters in the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, essentially disqualifying the results there.

During the campaign, intimidation and violence were used against several pro-Russian candidates, such as Oleg Tsarov of the Dnepropetrovsk region who ended up dropping out of the race. And although Tsarov had only scant voter support anyway, the incident showed that these elections were plagued with violations of proper electoral procedure.

Dozens of accredited journalists, mostly from Russia, were not allowed into Ukraine to report on the elections. The authorities in Kiev even refused entry to several hundred independent observers selected by the highly reputable Golos election monitoring non-governmental organization in Russia despite appeals from Poroshenko and Tymoshenko. Such emotional decisions are understandable, though, after the episode with Crimea, it is only natural that Ukraine categorically reject almost everything connected with Russia.

The Russian factor probably played the central role in this election and will continue to play a major role in the future. Speaking at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, President Vladimir Putin mitigated his earlier demand that Ukraine carry out constitutional reforms before Moscow would recognize the elections results adding that, although these elections were not entirely legitimate, they were better than nothing.

What's more, Putin expressed his willingness to work with the newly elected authorities. Of course, that does not mean the two presidents will meet anytime soon or even speak by telephone, but it might mean that Moscow will stop attempting to seriously destabilize the country and will allow the situation in Ukraine to normalize. In other words, Russia is not renouncing the struggle for influence in Ukraine but is willing to wait patiently in the expectation that Kiev — with nowhere else to turn — will itself initiate a dialogue with Moscow.

The economic situation in Ukraine is desperate. The International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the U.S. are unable to provide Ukraine with the money it needs. Unless Kiev restores economic ties with Russia in the short- and medium-term, Ukraine is probably headed for economic collapse.

Ukraine also stands in need of radical but unpopular reforms. To implement them, it is not enough to rally the elite against Russia; that is only partially effective and misses the main objective. What Ukraine needs is a leader who can rally the elite around a platform of reforms. At present, the elite are split into a number of rival clans that habitually break every mutual agreement they reach.

The country's regions have yet to reach a satisfactory compromise. Every Ukrainian president has supported either the eastern and southern regions of the country or else the western and central regions, but nobody has emerged whom citizens could rightfully consider the president of all the regions in equal measure.

Although Russia's demand for federalization seems to have disappeared, the issue itself has not, and it is unlikely the country can have a future without it. However, it is unclear how the government can implement needed but unpopular reforms while simultaneously moving toward federalization.

Adding to the problem, the new Ukrainian Constitution weakens the institution of the presidency, giving power to the country's the scandal-ridden and quarrelsome parliament. Worse, Poroshenko does not even have a political party on which he can rely, and Ukraine's security forces are deeply demoralized by Crimea.

Under such circumstances, it remains seriously doubtful that Ukraine can extricate itself from the current crisis without help. Appeals to the "democratic will" of the people and the "European choice" might sound good, but they will not solve the country's enormous problems. Democracy alone is not enough to end Ukraine's current deadlock. After all, for the last two decades Ukraine has enjoyed perhaps the greatest democratic freedoms of all the former Soviet republics, and yet this current impasse is the result.

I still believe that the only constructive and realistic option for Ukraine is some form of "external control." This would entail Russia, the European Union and the U.S. coming together and, in the cynical spirit of 19th century realpolitik, reaching some mutual agreement and then rigidly dictating to Ukraine the conditions and governmental structure required for its continued existence — and acting as the guarantor of Kiev's compliance with the arrangement.

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