The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Ukrainian Nation Has Been Born

By Maria Snegovaya

June 01, 2014



The pro-European protests on Kiev's Maidan Square, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea, brought forth two opposing narratives: some analysts predicted the unification of the country around pro-European policies, while others foresaw a split between the country's east and west.

The recent election's results have settled this debate. Instead of being torn into politically separate and culturally distinct areas, Ukraine's regions are merging into one unified nation that backs integration with Europe.

Ukraine's
election results
show that its
many regions are
finally merging
into one unified,
pro-Europe

nation, writes
Maria Snegovaya.

The results of 2014 Ukraine's presidential elections, only the sixth in Ukraine's contemporary history, are unique for the country. First, Petro Poroshenko persuasively won in the first round with 54.5 percent of the vote, eliminating the possibility of a runoff — an event that has not occurred in Ukraine since its first electoral campaign in 1991.

Even more importantly, Poroshenko won a persuasive victory in every region of Ukraine, including in the destabilized and traditionally pro-Russian southeast, a first for a presidential candidate.

In Kharkiv, for example, Poroshenko won with 35.3 percent, or 10 percent ahead the closest candidate. Poroshenko's win was yet higher in Odessa, where he took 41.7 percent of the vote, or 20 percent ahead of the second place candidate.

Even in unstable Luhansk and Donetsk regions, which had very low turnouts due to ongoing conflicts there, Poroshenko won with 35.1 and 35.7 percent of votes respectively, in both cases about 15 percent ahead of the closest candidate.

Poroshenko's victory in the southeast was particularly surprising given the pro-European orientation of his electoral platform, which championed further economic and political integration with Europe and the defense of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Poroshenko particularly stressed signing the trade agreement with European Union as soon as possible and fostering life "according to European standards." Contrary to previous electoral cycles, in 2014 these promises no longer chased southeastern voters away.

In 2004 and 2010 the situation was radically different. In both cases the east of the country voted against pro-western candidates like Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yushchenko, whose proposals were similar to Poroshenko's 2014 program. The southeastern voter in 2004 to 2010 feared enforced Ukrainization and did not support substituting Russia for Europe.

So, why did the southeast support Poroshenko in 2014? The lack of viable candidates during the 2014 elections can hardly be a sufficient reason. At least three typical "southeastern" candidates took part in the race — a Communist and two members of the Party of Regions.

Lower turnout in the southern and eastern regions also does not explain Poroshenko's victory, as the overall decrease in turnout did not exceed 10 to 15 percent in most southeastern regions, excluding Donetsk and Luhansk.

The more likely explanation is that southeastern Ukrainians turned away from their previous pro-Russian orientation.Take for example the results of the Party of Regions candidate, Serhiy Tigipko, who participated in both the 2010 and 2014 elections.

In 2010, despite the presence of strong pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych, Tigipko was able to raise substantial support in eastern Ukraine. He gathered more than 30 percent of the vote in the eastern Dnepropetrovsk region, and finished third in the race following Yanukovych and Tymoshenko with a total of 13 percent of the votes.

In 2014 Tigipko opposed Poroshenko with a moderate program, offering to build cooperation with Europe and Russia on the basis of "pragmatic mutually beneficial dialogue" and self-sufficient economic development.

Normally, that would be an ideal program for a conservative southeastern voter. In 2014, however, such a moderate approach did not bring Tigipko additional votes: he lost in every region, finishing fifth in the race with only 5.2 percent of total votes.

Tigipko's affiliation with the Party of Regions, discredited after Ukraine's pro-European protests, was one of the reasons for declining support. Overall, however, the change was driven by the evolving preferences of southeastern voters, who shifted from their previous Russia orientation closer to the preferences of the pro-Europe center and west of Ukraine.

The shift in value orientations was revealed in surveys earlier this spring. Following pro-European protests and Russia's invasion of Crimea, Ukrainians' views on the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity became much more aligned.

Pro-European sentiment has also grown in Ukraine. Support for European integration rose by 10 percent to 52 percent from February to March 2014, according to a poll by the Gallup Organization, while the number of people supporting participation in the Russia-led Customs Union has fallen by 12 percent. Support for Eurointegration rose primarily due to the residents of Ukraine's southeast, who have been changing their position on the issue due to Russia's aggressive behaviour.

The last presidential elections are a continuation of this story — changing values lead to changes in electoral behavior. Rather than being just a short-term mobilization of people attempting to preserve the country's sovereignty, Ukrainians have made a distinct choice in favor of European development, a path that is today increasingly supported across all of Ukraine.

Clearly, that is not the end of the story. The shift in preferences may be temporary rather than long-term, especially if implementation of pro-European reforms entails more economic losses for the population. In addition, given the extent of Ukraine's troubles, it is unclear how well Petro Poroshenko will be able to handle the double burden of restoring peace and reforming the country. Finally, Russia is likely to continue its destabilization efforts in the southeast with unclear outcomes for Ukraine's integrity.

Still, the fact remains that Ukraine has drawn closer as a nation.

Maria Snegovaya is a PhD student at Columbia University and a columnist at Vedomosti.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/06/01/the-ukrainian-nation-has-been-born-a36034