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Ukraine's Snap Election Won't Be a Miracle Cure

By Robert Person

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Finding itself locked in an existential struggle for the future of the Ukrainian state, Kiev has resorted to troubling measures aimed at those who might tip the political balance toward the Russian-backed rebels fighting in Ukraine's east. Such measures only serve to extinguish any hope for a democratic light at the end of the dark tunnel that is the current Ukrainian crisis.

The most disturbing of these measures is the draft law passed in its first reading in mid-August that gives the president and the National Security and Defense Council sweeping powers to block any television, radio or Internet outlet deemed threatening to national defense without a court order.

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Eerily reminiscent of similar laws meant to quash dissent in Russia, the Ukrainian law severely undermines the democratic legitimacy of the Kiev government.

Hopeful Ukrainophiles have suggested that this crisis of legitimacy can be solved by new elections to the parliament. But such hopes are misguided. A new round of elections will not address the underlying internal forces pulling Ukraine apart and may even exacerbate them.

The new elections, to be held in late October, were announced following the dissolution of the Ukrainian parliament by President Petro Poroshenko this Monday.

To be clear, the president does have the power to dissolve the parliament and call new elections in the event that a parliamentary coalition cannot form a government.

This condition was met in late July when the UDAR and Svoboda parties abandoned Yatsenyuk's governing coalition.

Thus, there is nothing undemocratic about the dissolution of the parliament and the calling of new elections, a phenomenon that takes place frequently in parliamentary democracies across the globe. New elections will clear out the "old guard," many of whom were one-time Yanukovych supporters and potential obstructionists of much-needed reforms in parliament.

Poroshenko and his allies have articulated the crucial importance of passing new economic and political reforms if Ukraine is to survive its current crisis.

But calling new elections may exacerbate the political and cultural rifts running through Ukraine. There is little doubt that new elections will produce a parliament representative of the political preferences of citizens in those parts of Ukraine not beset by conflict.

This includes the western portions of Ukraine, well known as the cradle of Ukrainian nationalism, as well as the regions in central Ukraine whose citizens are likely to rally around the flag as their country is pulled apart by pro-Russian rebels in the east.

Thus, we can expect a new Ukrainian parliament to be staunchly pro-Ukrainian, pro-Kiev and anti-Russian. There is nothing wrong with the first two. A unified Ukraine under the leadership of a capable and effective government in Kiev would be a dream come true. But it is the third part that bodes ill for the unification and healing of a country with a significant ethnic Russian population.

With Ukraine's ethnic Russian population concentrated in the eastern regions and cities where the fighting has taken place, these populations — citizens of Ukraine, many of whom wish to remain living in a Ukraine that respects their rights and roles — will not have a voice in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

If fighting continues into the fall and into the electoral campaign season, then it will obviously be impossible for elections to be held in rebel-controlled areas.

But even if the fighting has been extinguished by then, it would be nearly impossible for the Central Electoral Commission of Ukraine to competently mobilize the resources necessary to hold a transparent election in eastern regions. If Ukraine's ethnic Russian minority cannot vote, their voices will not be heard in Kiev.

Some will inevitably ask why we should care about listening to the voices of a group that has supported the separatists in their quest to dismantle Ukraine's territory. Notwithstanding the dubious veracity of the assumption that all ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine support separatism, such questions fundamentally misunderstand the task that lies ahead if Kiev is to rebuild a unified Ukraine within its current borders.

The late scholar Seymour Martin Lipset once defined political legitimacy as involving "the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society."

How will Ukraine's ethnic Russians assess the legitimacy of a parliament whose parties and members do not represent their community's legitimate interests? And how will Kiev achieve the territorial unity it seeks if significant swaths of its population do not believe that Ukraine's political institutions are the proper ones to govern their society?

A unified, stable Ukraine will depend heavily on true reconciliation between Ukraine's east and the rest of the country after a bloody and traumatic civil war.

Calling new parliamentary elections in Ukraine will not help heal these wounds and may even open new ones. I am reminded of former Russian prime minister and ambassador to Ukraine Viktor Chernomyrdin's famous quote in the early 1990s that "we hoped for the best, but what we got was the usual."

Those who dream of a re-legitimized government and reinvigorated Ukraine arising from new elections will almost certainly find their hopes dashed as they are forced to swallow yet more of "the usual."

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