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Ukraine's Yatsenyuk Expects to Stay On as Prime Minister Following Election

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Ukraine's Arseniy Yatsenyuk said Wednesday he expected to stay on as prime minister at the head of a new pro-Europe, reformist government as his party hung on to a slight lead in last Sunday's election with the vote count nearly complete.

Power-sharing talks have been going on behind the scenes in Ukraine after the poll gave a resounding win to parties committed to European integration, shifting the ex-Soviet republic further away from the Russian orbit despite rebellion by pro-Russian separatists in the east.

Referring to his People's Front party, Yatsenyuk said: "The party which has taken first place in the elections has to begin the process of forming a coalition ... the leader of (this) party heads the government."

People's Front was still slightly ahead of the political group of President Petro Poroshenko, taking just over 22 percent of the vote for parties with more than 98 percent of the votes for parties counted.

There has been speculation that Poroshenko, a 49-year-old confectionery magnate who emerged as president from turmoil last winter in which a Moscow-backed leader was ousted, would prefer to have a close party ally, Volodymyr Groysman, who is currently a deputy prime minister, as head of a new government.

Groysman's role in working out a blueprint for decentralizing local powers in the separatist-minded east feeds into the task of bringing peace to the region, one of the main tasks before the new leadership.

Yatsenyuk confirmed all the same that, as prime minister, he would expect to work in close tandem with Poroshenko.

He said Poroshenko's bloc was "the main strategic partner for bringing about change in the country," confirming that the partnership between the two men would be likely to dominate the political landscape in the near future.

Sunday's election and the formation of a new parliament and government are intended to draw a line under the turmoil and war of the past year.

Hawkish Comments

Irked by the ousting of pro-Russian leader Viktor Yanukovych last February by Kiev street protests, Russia annexed Crimea and backed the separatists when rebellions against the new pro-Western leaders in Kiev broke out in the industrialized east.

With the death toll in the conflict in the east at more than 3,700 and relations with Russia, Ukraine's main energy supplier, at rock bottom, settling the separatist conflict is one of the main tasks facing the new leadership.

The 40-year-old magisterial Yatsenyuk, a former economy and foreign minister whose has made hawkish comments about Russia during the crisis, once called the prime minister's job "political suicide."

But he is a favorite with the West because of his commitment to deep, sometimes unpopular, reform and his calm direction of the war-ravaged economy.

Once the party vote count is complete and votes are in also from single-mandate constituencies, Yatsenyuk said a coalition should be pulled together from all the pro-Europe parties which had qualified for parliamentary representation for them to decide on the make-up of the new government.

"I propose we call this the European Ukraine coalition," he said. "A new pro-Europe government and a new pro-reform European majority should emerge in parliament which will be capable of launching speedy reforms that can not be put off," he said.

He said he would like all the pro-Europe parties to take part in power-sharing talks, including the Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) party of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, a radical populist party and Samopomich (Selfhelp), a party headed by the mayor of the western city of Lviv.

He said he hoped a parliamentary coalition could take shape within the next three weeks to allow for the naming of a possible government.

Much though depends on the next moves of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the principal actor in the geopolitical crisis between Russia and the West over Ukraine.

To Kiev's dismay, Russia on Tuesday came out in support of a rebel vote for autonomy in separatist-controlled areas of the east next Sunday despite earlier saying it would respect the results of the Ukraine's national election last Sunday.

Poroshenko on Wednesday denounced the planned rebel vote. "Under the barrels of automatic weapons, the terrorists and bandits ...want to make a fake show of self-expression for the people of Donbass," he said referring to the historic name for the industrialized east.

Russia opposes Kiev's plans to join the European Union and is seeking to unstitch a landmark association agreement between the EU and Ukraine. As well as being able to exert pressure over gas supplies, Putin could also remove trade concessions from Kiev if it leans too sharply towards the West.

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