

December 10, 2004

Half a world away, Ukrainians watch, wait for a Viktor-y



Photo: Courtesy/Mykola Sarazhynskyy Students from the Iowa State Ukrainian Club recently drove to Chicago to cast votes in the Ukraine election from their country's consulate.

By Ayrel Clark
Daily Staff Writer

For Olena Zakharenko, the scene at the Ukrainian consulate in Chicago was euphoric.

Leaving Ames at 6 a.m. on Oct. 31, Zakharenko and 11 others traveled to the city in order to cast their votes in the Ukrainian election. In Chicago, the group met more people than Zakharenko had imagined.

"I didn't expect to see so many people at the consul. Everyone was so inspired and carrying flags," says Zakharenko, graduate student in business administration. She had no idea this trip would be the first of several to allow Ukrainian citizens who are now at Iowa State to participate in a democratic revolution.

Zakharenko is quick to note that this year's presidential election in Ukraine -- pitting opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko against Ukrainian and Russian government-supported Viktor Yanukovych -- is different than any other election.

Mykola Sarazhynskyy, president of the Iowa State Ukrainian Club, says Ukrainians abroad were concerned that, if they didn't cast a vote, someone else would do so for them -- and not necessarily for the candidate of their liking.

"We wanted our voice to be heard," he says.

The concerns are founded in the murky history of Ukraine's so-called democracy. During the campaign to the election, allegations were made that Yushchenko was poisoned by government officials. Current president Leonid Kuchma's track record is also deficient, as his government has been tied to handouts, bribes and press manipulation.

The drive to Chicago made for a long trip, says Yuliya Dubinyuk, but those participating believed they were doing the right thing.

"I feel that it is important to participate in my home country's affairs," says Dubinyuk, graduate student in business administration. "I feel I wanted to contribute my vote to good things that change the station of the country."

But the country's station didn't change because of the Oct. 31 vote. A runoff ensued when no candidate captured a majority. The top two candidates, Yushchenko and Yanukovych, were separated by less than 1 percent -- Yushchenko captured 39.87 percent of the votes to Yanukovych's 39.32. On Nov. 21, 21 people again loaded into vans and headed for Chicago to participate in democracy once more.

It turned out to be an exercise in futility, at least Yushchenko supporters say. As votes poured in -- with voter turnout exceeding 76 percent, according to Ukraine's Central Election Commission -- so did claims of fraud and abuse of the system. Despite complaints from the Yushchenko camp of ballot box stuffing and busing of Yanukovych supporters to areas of the country seen as pro-Yushchenko, the electoral committee announced a victory for Yanukovych by 3 percentage points. In turn, Yushchenko declared himself the winner.

Dubinyuk says she was shocked by what she sees as obvious fraud.

"It's past all possible expectation of what could happen," she says of the runoff election. "I'm really surprised at how bad it could get."

A legacy of corruption

Ukraine, located between Russia and Poland, is a nation with customs not unlike those of the United States, Sarazhynskyy says, except for different holidays and languages.

"People have the same good attitudes," he says. "They are similar to Midwest culture; people are hardworking."

But the governments are on different planes. The United States is one of the most established democracies in the world. By contrast, only 19 countries out of 145 are ranked more corrupt than Ukraine by Transparency International, a non-governmental organization devoted to combating corruption.

"To even call Ukraine a procedural democracy would be a stretch," says Eric McGlinchey, assistant professor of political science.

Since World War II, Ukraine has been seen as a piece of the Soviet empire. Tania Tipton, a retired instructor of Russian, lived in Ukraine for the first seven years of her life, during World War II.

Eastern Ukraine was more influenced by Russia, but Western Ukraine was occupied by Germany, she says.

The country became a Soviet republic after the war. As such, Tipton says, Ukraine's industry was very important. Russia dominated the culture; schools in Ukraine were taught in Russian.

"In villages, Ukrainian was spoken," Tipton says. "It was considered not the language of the educated."

But Ukraine is more suitable for democracy than Russia is, Sarazhynskyy says.

"Democratic values are more in the soul of Ukrainians," he says. "Russia needs strong leaders to rule the federation, and, if not, it would break apart.

"Russians have the mentality of being an empire, and deep in their hearts they still want it. Ukraine does not have that illness."

McGlinchey says parts of Ukraine are still very Moscow-oriented, however. Kuchma has very strong ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin, he says.

Under Kuchma, "corruption was basically the glue that held the country together," McGlinchey says.

"He can use the money of the state and distribute it down to local representatives, and people do his bidding," he says. "In return for being faithful to the president, they can run their little areas like fiefdoms."

A new runoff

Sarazhynskyy, Dubinyuk and Zakharenko agree the claims of fraud in the runoff election are absolutely true.

In separate votes, the Supreme Court and Ukrainian Parliament also agreed. On Dec. 1, Parliament voted no confidence in the Yanukovich government, and, on Dec. 3, the court called for a new vote. The runoff is set for Dec. 26.

New election laws should make voter fraud more difficult, and changes to the executive branch will provide more power to the parliament, McGlinchey says.

Zakharenko said he doesn't feel Yanukovich has a chance at winning the runoff.

"They don't have enough support," she says. "It's impossible because most of the people voted for Yushchenko, and I'm sure about that."

Zakharenko will cast her support for Yushchenko in Ukraine while she is home during winter break. Sarazhynskyy says another group of students, about 12 to 15, will return to Chicago for what should be the third and final vote. Dubinyuk will join them.

Putin seems to have resigned to at least the idea of a Yushchenko victory, conceding he will support the will of the Ukrainian people.

"Putin was slapped in the face by protests," says McGlinchey. "He's had to back down, and he's never backed down like this with Ukraine."

The policy change can be attributed to the Ukrainian people, who have flooded Independence Square at the center of Kiev, the capital, to protest the election. The Ukrainian students say if they were there, they, too, would be in the Square.

"This is a good opportunity to express your opinion, especially when you see this mass action," says Zakharenko, whose family took to the streets after the runoff election. "You cannot stay indifferent."

Copyright © 2004, Iowa State Daily