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Billionaire oligarch declared winner in Ukraine elections

By Thomas Gaist

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Oligarch Petro Poroshenko was declared the winner of presidential elections held in Ukraine on Sunday. According to exit polls, the billionaire pro-European Union “chocolate king” had about 56 percent of the vote, far ahead of fellow oligarch and former prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko.

The aim of the poll was to provide a semblance of political legitimacy to the right-wing regime installed three months ago with US and EU support, and backed by fascistic forces. Wide sections of the population boycotted the elections, particularly in the east and the south, where many polling stations were closed. The poll was conducted under conditions of mounting violence and intimidation directed at opponents of the Kiev government.

While the Ukrainian regime and its supporters declared the election a great success, turnout was low, at only 55 percent across the country.

In an effort to guide the election, the Obama administration sent observers, led by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. On Friday, a US Navy missile cruiser arrived in the Black Sea, underscoring the active involvement of US military and intelligence agencies in the country.

US President Barack Obama quickly declared the election a success, calling it an “important step forward in the efforts of the Ukrainian government to unify the country”—a reference to the new government’s hostility to the separatist and pro-Russian movements in the east, where the population is majority-Russian speaking.

In the weeks preceding the election, Poroshenko emerged as the consensus candidate among forces in the Ukrainian ruling class favoring closer relations with the EU and the imposition of deep austerity measures against the working class. He received the endorsement of former boxing champion Vitali Klitschko, who was elected mayor of Kiev.

Poroshenko is a veteran political operator in Ukraine who served for five years as the head of the Council of Ukraine’s National Bank. He is the owner of the Roshen Confectionary Corporation, with a net worth of some \$1.3 billion, and was also a chief financial supporter of the 2004 western-backed “Orange Revolution.”

Poroshenko’s task will be to continue the integration of Ukraine into the EU, the issue that made previous President Victor Yanukovych a target of US and German imperialism. Poroshenko has vowed to complete an economic and political association agreement with the EU initiated in March, committing the country to harsh austerity measures in the guise of “reforms.” Signing the second part of the agreement was deliberately put off until after the polls so that the unpopular measures it mandates would not become an election issue.

Before casting his ballot, Poroshenko stressed the importance of fostering “a very good investment climate” in Ukraine, and adopting “all the necessary things to attract business.”

While saying that stability in Ukraine requires some sort of dialogue with Russia, Poroshenko also insisted that he does not recognize the annexation of Crimea by Russia or the independence of the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk, which have declared themselves to be autonomous.

The second-place position in the election went to Yulia Tymoshenko, the billionaire natural gas oligarch, who received about 13 percent of the vote according to preliminary results. Tymoshenko, whose 7 year-prison sentence was commuted in the wake of the US-backed February putsch, responded to Poroshenko’s victory by calling for national unity and for a referendum on Ukraine’s accession to NATO.

In the weeks preceding the poll, Right Sector forces beat, intimidated and killed members of the Borotba (“Struggle”) group and the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU). Oleg Tsarev, of

Yanukovych's Party of the Regions, was beaten by right-wing forces as well. Both Tsarev and the KPU candidate withdrew from the elections and called for a boycott.

While the new regime has relied on fascistic forces as the shock troops of the "revolution" and to terrorize political opposition, popular support for these groups is very low, in both the east and the west. Svoboda Party leader Oleg Tyahnybok received only 1.3 percent of the vote, and Right Sector head Dmitry Yarosh received 1.1 percent.

The election was held under deepening civil war conditions, particularly in the east. The sham character of the election was exposed by the mass boycott by millions in the industrial and largely Russian-speaking sections of the country. There were also reports of separatist forces taking control of ballots or shutting down polling stations.

The Ukrainian Central Elections Commission found that turnout in the Donetsk region was barely more than 12 percent. According to sources cited by *Ria Novosti*, elections did not take place at all in 23 of Donetsk's cities.

Even as the elections have proceeded, these areas have been subjected to occupation and bombardment by regime forces. Video footage surfaced on Friday showing Ukrainian ultranationalist forces attacking Ukrainian regulars who had refused to fire on civilians and separatist groups. Clashes were still occurring near Slavyansk on Saturday, with an Italian journalist and his Russian colleague killed in the crossfire.

Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk made clear that repression against the population in the east, where hostility to the quasi-fascist regime in Kiev is especially strong, will continue in the days ahead. "I would like to assure our compatriots in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, who will be prevented from coming to the polling stations by the war waged against Ukraine: The criminals don't have much time left to terrorize your land."

Fearing that the increasingly explosive situation in Ukraine may catalyze an upsurge of opposition against his own government, Russian President Vladimir Putin has responded to the elections with a number of conciliatory statements.

Putin declared that he is prepared to work with whoever wins the election, despite what he described as "chaos and full blown civil war."

Putin signaled his desire to forge a compromise with US imperialism and de-escalate the crisis. "Despite our varying, maybe diametrically non-overlapping approaches in assessing critical situations, we nevertheless continue cooperation," Putin said. "They [the US] have not suspended military cargo transit to and from Afghanistan via our territory, because it is convenient for them. As a matter of fact, we have not refused it, either," he added.

