



MAY 29, 2014

EUROPE INSPIRES DESPITE ITS PROBLEMS

by Josh Stanton

As Americans enjoyed an uneventful Memorial Day weekend, Europeans went to the polls in two separate but strongly linked elections. Ukrainians braved political, economic and territorial instability to vote in a snap presidential ballot while EU citizens chose European Parliament (EP) representatives. Despite their disparate nature, both elections ultimately were referenda on the same issue: more or less "Europe".

The EP results included substantial gains for euroskeptic groups. France's far-right *National Front*, garnering 25 percent, led President François Hollande's Socialists and other mainstream groups. The UK Independence Party, which advocates a British withdrawal from the EU, also won, the first time since 1906 that victory did not go to the Tories or to Labour. Even Germany, the champion of European integration for decades, saw euroskeptic voices gain prominence; the anti-euro *Alternative für Deutschland* won seven seats. The message is clear: Disillusionment with the EU is strong and increasing. Economic morass and the euroskeptic perception that Brussels is run by elites who are increasingly out of touch with the needs of ordinary citizens is a growing threat to the future of European project.

While EU citizens were reluctant to support further European integration, Ukrainians embraced it. Their election was as much about the country's identity and future as it was about choosing a new leader. Despite efforts by pro-Russian separatists to disrupt voting in eastern regions, about 60 percent of eligible voters nationwide turned out to support Petro Poroshenko, the confectionery tycoon whose support of the pro-EU Maidan protest movement helped him rise to prominence. Poroshenko pledged in his campaign to offer his countrymen "a new way of life", one that sees Ukraine more politically and economically integrated with the EU.

Ironically, Ukrainians voted for "more Europe" as many in the EU voted for less. The Ukrainians' remarkable struggle to pursue a future centered on the West serves as a stark reminder, despite legitimate criticisms of Brussels, of the importance of the European project

and the transformative effect that EU norms and institutions can have. The bloc remains a beacon to a Ukraine that, since gaining independence in 1991, has suffered from endemic corruption and political allegiances that have often existed only to advance the personal interests of those in power. Ukraine's oligarchs hold undue influence over the country's economy, and they have used wealth to acquire influence and power in the parliament. The result has been a rotten political system that shuns the rule of law, promotes instability and hinders economic development.

The prospect of closer association with the EU gives Ukraine an opportunity to break free from this system. Ukrainians need only to look at former communist EU member states, such as Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, to glimpse their own potential future. Since gaining EU membership in 2004, the quartet has seen remarkable economic growth. Poland was Europe's only major economy to avoid recession during the crisis, and the Baltic states together averaged 6.8 percent growth through 2008. This impressive performance was due in large part to access to the EU's single market. Even after suffering (with most of Europe) the effects of the global financial crisis, Baltic economies rebounded strongly to enjoy some of the most robust growth in the EU, an average rate of 5.4 percent in 2011-12. All four countries have also made substantial progress attacking systemic corruption, and their success has been reflected in steady improvements in their rankings on Transparency International's annual corruption perception index. Ukrainians seek to replicate these accomplishments and understand this can happen only by turning towards Brussels.

In that capital, there is no doubt that the latest EU vote is a wake-up call for the bloc's leaders to address its own festering economic, political and institutional problems. European Council President Herman van Rompuy's May 28 announcement that the Council will launch consultations on future policies is a small first step towards doing this. EU leaders need to explore reforms that increase transparency and reduce the bloc's democratic deficit. But they must also renew the case for Europe and confront the current, disdainful public discourse on integration.

Many have struggled and some among Kyiv's Maidan protestors have died in the pursuit of a European future. The EU has played a tremendously positive role in promoting peace and stability on the continent. Ukrainians in the main understand that. Others seem to need a reminder.

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