

OPINION

UKRAINE ELECTION

Some things I learned as an election observer in Ukraine

We need to help bring more hope to the regular citizens so they can step forward and build their society through civil engagement.



BY ISABEL METCALFE

CRIMEA, UKRAINE—With the eerie sound of dogs barking and alongside observers from Poland and officials from the electoral office of the oblast, or the riding, we were able to enter a prison in Ukraine to observe the vote. I was in the port city of Gherson on the Dneiper River and part of a group of some 60 Canadians sent to Ukraine by the Government of Canada with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as elections observers.

With 700 prisoners—all males, and average age 26—and all dressed in Adidas uniforms, they were being grouped in tens to vote. The issue of felons casting ballots is an important human rights issue and Ukraine is proud that it is compliant with international instruments. As we rounded the corner from the prison yard to the voting hall, you could hear the voices. There were about 20 local women conducting the election. What a surprise it was for us and what a brief moment of respite for the voters.

Holding their tea, coffee or Crimean fruit, they looked like they could be the mothers, neighbours, or sisters of these prisoners.

The large room was like any other polling station in Ukraine. The young men all lingered as they got their ballots, dawdled as they cast their votes, and reluctantly

left the voting space to return to their hard world. Good for Ukraine to allow such freedom.

At around midnight, the 22 women around the table began to count the ballots. The polling stations all closed at 8 p.m., but the process was so tedious and long that the actual count seemed like it took forever to achieve.

Like many rural women on a Sunday night, these Ukrainian women treated the counting like a card game. They read out the name of each candidate, passed it to one of their peers, who then added it to the pile. They joked, gossiped, and counted ballots. But unlike a Canadian election, they needed to stay for another two hours to meticulously by hand complete about 25 “protocols” which will become the official document of the election. It was meticulous and

boring work. Any energy that the women had seeped out the door as they began this laborious task. And the democratic issue is that anywhere else, they would be heading out to the party to celebrate their winner. The expertise required by the local women to manage more than 24 local officials, organize the process, and pay for their work would be better used as campaign managers, officials agents, canvass chairs or—more importantly—candidates. Bright, educated, and hard-working, this is the pool that will help build democracy in Ukraine.

This election saw the installation of video cameras in each polling booth at a huge expense. Why could they not spend that money on training of candidates and official agents to allow for independent fundraising? Why could they not spend that money on media training so that candidates can get their own messages out? There are many capable, competent, and energized people in Ukraine who with some training could build the infrastructure for a functioning democracy. The women we saw at the local and riding level would be better-served with computers to speed up election results. Candidates and workers would also be better served.

This great nation, which can grow wheat, apples, grapes, and many other agricultural products, needs to stop focusing on a laborious process and start focusing on training and encouraging citizens to seek public office.

What will happen to all those video cameras installed in schools and community halls? Could they be used for media training for local candidates who want to run? Could they be used by the female leader in the community for training sessions on raising money? Could young political hopefuls use them to recruit a team of workers to work independently of the oligarchs and build their own team?

This was my fifth election observation on behalf of the Government of Canada for the OSCE to Ukraine with two previous missions to Albania and Azerbaijan. I left this electoral mission with a sense of pride that Canada was playing such an important role, but also with a feeling of disappointment that this nation seems stuck.

We need to help bring more hope to the regular citizens so they can step forward and build their society through civil engagement and through supporting an enhanced voluntary community. Instead of always focusing on the negative aspects of the election—which is in every nation—we need to focus on providing support to the leaders in the community, including many women, who can build their nation and move it forward. As I concluded each visit to a polling station, I always like to say something encouraging to the workers.

As Canadians, we hold a proud and important place in Ukraine, as long-time friends and allies, during darker times. Let's try and bring more sunlight for the next election.

Isabel Metcalfe has completed seven OSCE electoral missions on behalf of the Government of Canada. She was sent to observe Ukraine's Parliamentary elections on Oct. 28 as part of the Mission Canada-Ukraine Elections 2012, led by Conservative Senator Raynell Andreychuk. Canada sent 500 election observers to Ukraine, including 420 who formed the Mission Canada-Ukraine Elections 2012. Ms. Metcalfe recently was awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal.

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