

A Voice for Democracy in Ukraine

By Sarah Newton

This fall, I was invited to take part in the Canadian Election Observation Missions (CANEOM) visit to Ukraine to witness the parliamentary election on Oct. 26.

The country had recently overthrown, for a second time, former president Viktor Yanukovich. He had been accused of enriching himself, abandoning a European Union partnership and ordering the deaths of at least 88 protesters, now known as the Heavenly Hundred of the Euromaidan, in 48 hours of bloodshed.

When our team arrived, Kiev's majestic Maidan Nezalezhnosti was peaceful and solemn. We learned that Ukrainian people were functioning within an elaborate election process whereby thousands of party representatives and most of the nation's police force corroborated to register voters, ensure incorruptibility of ballot counts and score tallies.

After extensive training by Canadian senator Raynell Andreychuk, observers were dispatched to different regions and equipped with data-gathering tools. Our experiences became more personal and reflective of the local climate as we stepped in, mostly as welcome guests, to the village polling stations or precinct electoral commissions as they are known.

What I personally witnessed while travelling through the richly-soiled 'produce belt' of Ukraine was a well-built, gracious culture that had suffered a lack of civic infrastructure as a result of corruption. Yet people were scrutinizing every step of the election process with the utmost care.

Many times I was humbled by the conditions Ukrainian people endured

to cast their vote, and yet we often visited places where voter turnout was 85 per cent or higher. I sat in solidarity for nearly 36 hours while members of each precinct electoral commission had their votes tallied at the district electoral commission for the region.

Many expressed concern for the situation in southeastern Ukraine where family members in oblasts (the equivalent of provinces) had declared independence after Yanukovich had fled, resulting in 4.6 million mostly Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens being unable to cast a ballot.

As the party once led by Yanukovich was wiped from parliament, I couldn't help but wonder if the Crimean Peninsula's population could have voted to keep their party in parliament, and insisted that the country honour the experience and historical perspective of these members by engaging them in democratic negotiations, while more Europe-leaning parties prevented further corruption by seeking international support.

I began to see that the separation and demand for an independent vote in Donetsk and Luhansk was perhaps a needless and tragic measure. Had the 4.6 million, largely poverty-stricken people of those regions cast a ballot, a different, perhaps richer conversation may have unfolded over the coming parliamentary session that reflected Ukraine's cultural diversity and Soviet heritage.

During our visit, Russian president Vladimir Putin took part in the final plenary meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club's XI session in Sochi. While I witnessed a brand new democracy forming, with its classical hope for self-determination and sovereignty, President Putin made

a remarkable speech that challenged global citizens to accept that "the very notion of 'national sovereignty' was becoming a relative value for most countries."

Once I was back in Canada, I read of the early November independent election held in the south east, a new legislature now being called the Donetsk People's Republic. The democratic inroads made in Ukraine that were also the human right of those in the south east, fell again into the chaos of an unregulated, unrecognized, non-registered vote where results were seemingly skewed toward certain representatives to a staggering degree. I was truly saddened.

I hope Canadians remain vigilant in offering support to this thriving country as it clears corruption from its parliament and attempts to reap the harvest of what President Putin, in his speech, called the "free and open atmosphere and chance to express all manner of very different and frank opinions" that is the democratic pledge.

God forbid the Ukraine I perceived as thoughtful, forward-looking and passionate look to Canada for an example and receive an understanding of anything less than the highest form of participation, consensus and transparency.

My time in Ukraine instilled in me a lifetime commitment to democracy building, the open-skied innovative variety that allows for the sort of engagement and inter-relationships that President Putin describes as ideal.

Sarah Newton is an area resident who has been involved with programming with WhiStle Radio.



Senator Raynell Andreychuk trained observers taking part in the CANEOM visit to Ukraine.



Sarah Newton (left) with fellow members of the Canadian Election Observation Missions team during their visit to witness the Ukrainian parliamentary election on Oct. 26.

Watch for us
in the Stouffville Santa
Claus parade on
Dec. 6th!
Goodies for the kids!

TINY SEEDLINGS.com

ARRIVES IN
STOUFFVILLE!

INTRODUCING
Daisy & Toby
Tiny Seedlings Ambassadors

Kids aged 5-7 will be thrilled to know that this amazing new program for them is coming just for Stouffville. Tiny Seedlings will have games, puzzles, events, giveaways, contests and much more, all built especially for this age group in a family safe web portal. All FREE and all just for kids in Stouffville.

UNITED SOILS

Giving back to our community through Tiny Seedlings.

SAVE THE DATE:
Family
"Fire & Ice" Event
Jan. 24th

"Daisy"

"Toby"