

Foreign policy community hosts discussion of Ukraine's elections

by Oleg Ivanov

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WASHINGTON — The American Foreign Policy Council joined the Center for U.S.-Ukrainian Relations on April 4 in hosting a discussion of the recent parliamentary elections in Ukraine. The panel assembled for the debriefing consisted of four members: Oleh Shamshur, Ukraine's ambassador to the United States; Karen Stewart, director of the Office of Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus Affairs at the U.S. Department of State; Ronald McNamara, deputy chief of staff of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; and Adrian Karatnycky, president of The Orange Circle.

Held in the Capitol, the near-capacity meeting was attended by various policy-makers, scholars and NGO staff members. After a few brief remarks from Ilan Berman, the discussion's moderator and vice-president for policy at the American Foreign Policy Council, Ambassador Shamshur provided a general assessment of the elections. While acknowledging certain shortcomings in the actual voting process, like the lengthy and complicated ballots and some miscommunication

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between the central and local election commissions, the ambassador focused mainly on the positive lessons of the Verkhovna Rada elections. Chief among these were the free and fair nature of the elections and the pro-Western mandate that the outcome of the vote seemed to imply.

For the first time in the nation's history, according to Dr. Shamshur, Ukraine pulled off a wholly transparent, democratic and undisputed election. This was especially evident among the press, which was completely unhindered by the government in its attempt to provide an accurate account of the election process, and the Central Election Commission, which was singled out by the ambassador for its competency and evenhandedness.

"Ukraine passed the test of democracy," Ambassador Shamshur declared, citing the 70 percent turnout rate to support President Viktor Yushchenko's claim that the nation has completed the "post-Soviet democratization process."

Possibly even more important, however, was that the results of the elections, which gave the ruling Orange bloc of the president and his allies 42 percent of the vote, appeared to bode well for further Euro-Atlantic integration. The ambassador saw these results as a show of support for the president's various policies, such as his democratic and free market reforms, whose ultimate goal is to make it possible

for Ukraine to join the European Union and NATO. Ukraine's improving living standards and developing democratic institutions have moved it closer to Europe and America than it has ever been — both diplomatically and economically.

Ms. Stuart echoed these sentiments in her brief statement, proclaiming that the results of the elections signaled a continuation of the Orange Revolution. Like the Ukrainian ambassador, she saw the vote as evidence of a positive outlook towards Euro-Atlantic integration among the Ukrainian people. And while she saw the first "Orange year" as a successful one, Ms. Stuart did call on the Ukrainian government to do more to fight corruption throughout every sector of society.

Mr. McNamara, who observed the elections at several polling stations on behalf of the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also gave an unqualified positive appraisal of the voting process. He saw these as the first truly free and fair elections among all of the ex-Soviet states of Eurasia.

Like Mr. Shamshur, Mr. McNamara also noted that the media coverage of the elections was far more balanced than it has ever been in Ukraine. He also emphasized the overwhelming enthusiasm and diligence of the poll workers. Like his copanelists, Mr. McNamara saw the elections as a sign of Ukraine's continuing

political, economic and social progress.

As the only member of a non-government organization on the panel, Mr. Karatnycky went a little further than the other panelists in his assessment of the elections and what they meant for Ukraine's future. Unlike the others, he pointed out the harsh political discourse between the Orange and anti-Orange political forces that accompanied the election. Despite the quarrelling, he argued, the differences between these two blocs are actually narrowing; he pointed out that Viktor Yanukovich, the head of the government opposition, has even recently declared his support for further European integration. "The majority of Ukrainians," Mr. Karatnycky argued, "are pro-Europe, pro-business and pro-rule of law."

"Ukraine is a European state," Mr. Karatnycky stated. He predicted that the new government, which will likely be another Orange coalition headed by Yulia Tymoshenko as the prime minister, will embody this quality above all others. Though problems related to the nation's initial post-Soviet privatization efforts will continue to surface, the new Orange government will continue to seek conciliation with its opponents to keep Ukraine on track toward Euro-Atlantic integration. As President Yushchenko recently declared, it will take a bipartisan effort to implement the reforms necessary for Ukraine's continuing economic and democratic success.