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Ukraine elections

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Michael R. Caputo - *KIEV, Ukraine.* -- More than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, freedom-loving Ukrainians face a vital decision in Sept. 30 elections to their parliament, called the Rada. Unlike the early years after the fall, a return to communism is no danger. But their fledgling democracy could be condemned to another horrible fate. If the voters are not careful, they could end up just like America — doomed to a ballot without real choices.

While the United States stands as the paragon of global democracy, our nation boasts shamefully low voter turnout most election years. In contrast, up to 80 percent of Ukrainians consistently head to the polls. Despite being exhausted by three national elections in just two years, locals are enlivened by a European-style variety of candidates and parties. Democrats, reformers, fascists, nationalists, socialists, communists, and more vie for voters. Meanwhile, back home in America, our two-party system leaves many disenfranchised and casting about for more choices.

But at Kiev's Maidan Square, where hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians gathered to guarantee fair elections in 2004, a September Sunday walk showed Ukraine is headed our way. Just three parties were apparent, all a part of the fractured status quo — and all undeniably a part of the problem.

Reliable polls show Moscow-backed Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych's Party of Regions leading with 27 percent. Embattled president Viktor Yushchenko and his Our Ukraine Party garners 15 percent. This rivalry busted out globally in 2004 when Mr. Yushchenko survived a mystifying dioxin poisoning on the campaign trail, made less mysterious by the old guard's chummy relationship with Russia. That unique strategy for victory was recalled recently when the Kremlin allegedly tried it again, this time fatally, on a former KGB spy in London exile.

Sandwiched between the two leading men are Yulia Tymoshenko and her Bloc Yulia, at 22 percent. The first prime minister after Mr. Yushchenko recovered and was sworn in as president, the youthful beauty lasted only eight months before being fired in a sweeping corruption scandal. Angry and unrepentant, she bolted the Orange Coalition and launched a crusade focused on her martyrdom.

Soon, Ukrainians were treated to a near biblical transformation: her ubiquitous braided

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blonde hair, wrapped atop her head in a halo, was soon complemented by flowing white angelic dresses. Also backed by millions in Moscow cash, the modern-day Joan of Arc branded herself on a first-name basis with Ukrainians. Today, young and old alike call her Yulia.

Popular and empowered, Yulia took every open shot at the president. Finger-pointing supplanted governing. Fistfights broke out among Orange forces in the parliament and the coalition collapsed, its goals unrealized. The endless, miserable division forced Mr. Yushchenko to surrender last summer, and he formed a government with the old-guard star, Mr. Yanukovych.

Undaunted, Yulia used her seat in the Rada to increase her attacks. She made the news daily, her popularity soared, and divisions among Orange allies widened. And today, the Orange Revolution is dead, a casualty of her ambition and Mr. Yushchenko's tepid responses to Mr. Yanukovych's encroachments on the gains of the movement.

Yulia's party is now one of three mega-blocs and, as the parliament campaign season kicked off, the going got weird. An anonymous advertisement touted an age-old Nostradamus prediction that in 2007 a woman would come to power in the East and bring order. Yulia denied responsibility, but it earned vital national media coverage in a nation fond of the French soothsayer.

Then, in late August, Yulia announced she had secretly surveyed 30,000 Ukrainians. Her conclusion: the elections will certainly exclude all parties except hers and those of her top two tormentors. She refused to provide the polling research — perhaps the largest pre-election survey in world history — expecting voters to take her claim as an article of faith. Some are balking, especially in western and northern regions where her failure to back banking reform is blocking cash wired from family expatriates working abroad.

With this, Yulia urged the electorate to choose among mega-blocks instead of wasting votes on smaller parties. But contrary to her mythical survey, reliable research shows other parties may pass the 3 percent minimum threshold and join the Rada. Among them are the communists and the party of democratic reformer Volodymyr Lytvyn, former speaker of the Rada who kept the rowdy legislature from devolving into anarchy during the Orange Revolution. Rested and ready after losing re-election in 2006, he is a fresh face in a tired crowd of self-interested politicians.

Ukrainians would do well to disregard the Siren's call to vote only for the three large parties and head down the path toward an American-style democracy. They're far better off with several parties and the resulting European-style election diversity. In the parliament, these smaller parties would decide close votes on Ukraine's future.

But if they take Saint Yulia's advice, the young democracy will just get more of the same gridlock.

Michael R. Caputo, a Miami writer, lived in Russia from 1994 to 1999 as an election adviser to Boris Yeltsin's administration and was a media director of former President

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George H.W. Bush's 1992 re-election.

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