

The 2002 Parliamentary Elections in Ukraine: A Prelude to Change or Just Routine Business

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On January 1, 2002, Ukraine officially enters a campaign to elect the country's new legislature, the Verkhovna Rada. The elections that will take place on March 31 are widely viewed as being especially important because in 2004, during the term of the next Rada, Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma is expected to yield power. For all likely presidential contenders, much will depend on whether they will be able to use the Rada as their power base. Pro-Kuchma oligarchs in the Rada have to prove that their access to the so-called "administrative resource" does yield results beneficial for the president. Their failure to do so may not only cost them seats in the Rada, but political influence altogether. Finally, some radical non-Communist opposition representatives, if left outside the parliament and deprived of immunity against prosecution, may face criminal charges as well as political marginalization.

Before the Start

In the summer and fall of 2001, Ukraine's multiplicity of political parties (some 120) made it appear that diverse interests were being represented in domestic politics. Real power, however, lay in the hands of several groupings of oligarchs, often regional in nature, who to differing degrees supported Kuchma. All these groups have either founded political parties or bought well-known "brand name" political parties. These groups had and have conflicting business interests and struggle to influence the president (apparently the oligarchs from Dnipropetrovsk had the upper hand due to long-term connections with the president and the unofficial marriage of Kuchma's daughter to regional oligarch Viktor Pinchuk).

Ideology-driven political parties both on the national-democratic and left flanks were not in the best political shape. The People's Rukh, once united, split into three separate groups. National democrats could not find a uniting platform. While some smaller political parties joined the radical opposition, parties pushed into the opposition after Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko was voted out of government, especially former Rukh groups under Gennadi Udovenko and Yuri Kostenko as well as the Reforms and Order group of Viktor Pinzenik, included too many of Kuchma's former and present functionaries to be satisfied with their new

status as opposition. In turn, the Communists, although still strong enough individually, were ostracized after having spoken out against Yushchenko and Kuchma in the spring.

Ukraine's political opposition consisted of groups with widely diverging, even irreconcilable interests, including: The National Salvation Forum (FNS), most frequently associated with former deputy prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko; the Socialist Party of former speaker and presidential candidate Olexander Moroz; and Viktor Yushchenko's planned coalition, Our Ukraine. From the beginning it was clear that Yushchenko's ambitions would not let him become just another west Ukrainian opposition figure, struggling for sympathy in an area where only 7 of Ukraine's 49 million people live. In order to remain a national politician and to keep alive his presidential aspirations, Yushchenko needed the east Ukrainian vote and, ideally, a return to the executive to gain access to administrative leverages in order to prove to the *apparat* that he can be one of them and represent their interests. This result was totally dependent on a compromise with Kuchma in general and the lack of a demolishing campaign against "a western nationalist" in the east in particular. Thus in his speeches Yushchenko never criticized Kuchma.

By the summer of 2001, Kuchma's position had strengthened considerably. The "cassette scandal" was largely over. The new prime minister Anatoli Kinakh was a compromise figure, not directly belonging to any of the oligarchic groupings. In addition, by means of newly introduced institute of state secretaries, the presidential administration obtained additional instruments to influence the course of government. An opposition attempt in May to impeach the president failed. The composition of the Rada was another indicator that Kuchma was more firmly in control: propresidential factions controlled 198 seats. Other parties controlled a substantial number of seats (most significantly the Communist Party held 112 seats) but the possibility of the opposition uniting was, as indicated above, highly unlikely due to their vastly different political objectives and views. Furthermore, public confidence in the Rada was rather low due to Kuchma's successful advancement of his agenda by repeatedly threatening to dissolve the legislature.

Campaign

The campaign, which in reality has been warming up since the "cassette scandal" broke in November 2000, highlights a number of interesting characteristics of the current Ukrainian political process.

First, the paradigm of Ukrainian politics of "east versus west" is eroding. Although the degree to which this traditional divide is being overcome is not yet clear, it may be indicative of the consolidation of Ukraine as a nation-state. Coalition-building in 2001 was tailored to ensure, even if nominally, across-the-spectrum representation of national, social, religious and regional values, and not a sole focus on regional concerns. The initial list of members of Yushchenko's coalition Our Ukraine included devoted national democrats from the People's Rukh, Republican Christians, and Peasants' Party as well as the Liberals and Solidarity with the power base of the latter two in the east. The prominent inclusion of national democrats would previously not have been possible if the coalition hoped to have strong appeal in the east of Ukraine. Furthermore, Yushchenko was negotiating cooperation and, allegedly, possibly even a merger with Nikolai Azarov, the leader of Regions of Ukraine, which is even more indicative of Yushchenko's desire to appeal to the east. In turn, Tymoshenko, an heir of the Dniepropetrovsk-based Gromada, brought to her coalition Levko Lukyanenko, a hero of the independence movement, and even

sought accession to the FNS by the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists when the latter did not appear on Yushchenko's initial list. Even the propresidential centrist coalition For United Ukraine, in addition to the NDP, Regions, and Labourists, included the Agrarian Party, which is popular only in rural western Ukraine.

Second, Ukrainian politics are increasingly personality-based and recognition-vote oriented. Ratings of nearly all major politicians exceed those of their organizations. As of late October, according to a poll by the Razumkov Center, 23.3 percent of those polled fully supported Yushchenko, while Our Ukraine received 17.7 percent full support, Timoshenko and FNS 6 and 2.3 percent respectively, Moroz and the Socialist Party 5.8 and 2.1 percent, Viktor Medvedchuk and the United Social Democrats (USD) 4.2 and 3.8 percent (partial support has not been taken into account). For United Ukraine's rating was only 2.1 percent, less than the separate levels of support for Azarov, Valery Pustovoitenko, and Serhiy Tihypko. The renaming of the FNS as the Timoshenko Bloc in early November clearly demonstrated this trend. In the winter of 2001, the renaming of Our Ukraine after Yushchenko was being contemplated. The only notable exception to personality-based parties and voting was the Communists, whose party and leadership ratings coincided at 14 percent.

This overpersonification has three important implications. (1) The ambitions of political leaders rose to new heights. Unwillingness "to join" and a preference "to be joined" was the reason, for example, for why the popular mayor of Kiev, Olexander Omelchenko, decided to run independently from Yushchenko, although the union of the two politicians would have resulted in a synergetic effect that the presidential administration was afraid of (and is widely believed to have "preventively" interfered). (2) Conflicts among partners inside blocs and between participants and leaders became more pronounced. For example, on party lists for election space is limited, and in coalition parties disagreements can arise as to the quota of each party on the list. On Our Ukraine's list the question of quotas emerged between Yushchenko and the Rukh parties, which allegedly wanted to receive 25 percent each when Yushchenko was said to be initially ready to give them only 10 percent. Because the number of persons actually elected on each list will be very limited, the temptation to withdraw and run independently is strong. (3) The new electoral law, which prohibits candidates from running on both a party list and in single-mandate districts, confronted the leaders with a hard dilemma: to run and win in a district, thus taking a risk to become "a general without an army," or head the party list and maybe lose altogether.

Third, the obsession with wide coalitions ensured a lack of clear-cut electoral platforms. The opposition especially found itself in a particularly difficult situation. Without a clear message of "for," they had to mostly speak "against," which in the atmosphere of a slightly improving socioeconomic situation and the growing popularity of the prime minister (who enjoyed 33.4 percent "partial support" in October and whose "full support" percentage increased from 6-7 percent in early summer to 14 percent in October) was doomed to turn against the "oligarchs" generally and Kuchma personally. Again, when Kuchma's negative rating was 44.6 percent, while that of Timoshenko was 58.9, Simonenko 44.9, and Moroz 44.6, turning personal could do the opposition more harm than good.

In the course of the campaign, the president has further gained tactically. It currently appears that the administration has managed to compel the competing Donetsk and Dniepropetrovsk clans to run as a coalition, formally headed by the Chief of the presidential administration

Vladimir Litvin, although once in the parliament they may well split again. This was a difficult task from the outset. Donetsk comprises 10 percent of Ukraine's electorate and Dnipropetrovsk 7 percent, which could be a decisive contribution for Regions and Labourists to overcome the 4 percent electoral threshold. Then, more importantly, the emergence of a potentially dangerous coalition for Kuchma between Yushchenko and Timoshenko was prevented. Now that not only a political split but also harsh personal criticisms is a reality, Our Ukraine will be struggling against the Timoshenko Bloc for the votes that would never be within reach of propresidential centrists. With the same goal, Yushchenko and For United Ukraine are also likely to coordinate activities in single-mandate districts. To remove residual doubts, Kuchma's parliamentary representative Roman Bessmertny was appointed "ideological coordinator" of Our Ukraine and Petr Poroshenko, a person close to Azarov, became the head of Yushchenko's electoral staff. In this new situation the president adds to his traditional role of provider and controller of the "administrative resource" another important capacity, one of an arbiter, which will help him to persuade the new center to accept the election's results, whatever they are.

As for other major political forces, the weakening of the Left is particularly noteworthy. The electorate of the Communists is, of course, decreasing in number as their main supporters tend to be older, but probably, the main reason for their disproportionately rapid decline in popularity is an inability to pursue their agenda. In October the Communists suffered a severe blow when they were unable to block the adoption of the Land Code, which introduced private property and the right to sell and purchase land. With their current ratings, the Communists will find it extremely hard to repeat their electoral success of 1998, when they received 25 percent of the vote, let alone the 38 percent that Simonenko got in the presidential runoff of 1999. The Socialists are in greater jeopardy because their party's leader, Moroz, received only 11 percent of the vote in the first round of the 1999 presidential elections and their party may not make it to parliament at all in 2002.

Forecasts

To predict the exact composition of the new Verkhovna Rada is difficult. The share of "wasted" votes, that is, the votes cast for parties that do not pass the 4 percent threshold and that is later distributed between the winners as an electoral bonus, is usually quite high and in this election may reach between 15 and 25 percent. Single-mandate districts often bring surprises. Making some educated predictions, however, is not impossible. Based on electoral preferences (30–40 percent vote of Ukrainians vote for left parties, 15–20 percent for nationalists and the national-democratic, 30–40 percent are in the center, and 5–8 percent are against all) and assuming minimal election fraud, the following results are likely. The Communists may receive up to 20 percent, enabling them to have a bloc of about 100 deputies in the parliament (which has 450 seats). Our Ukraine may count on a similar result. However, much here will depend first on the performance of the third Rukh (Rukh for Unity), which, thanks to its name, may undermine Yushchenko's efforts in the west; and secondly on how many seats the coalition will be allowed to take in the east. Competition in the western districts is tougher in general and somewhat disadvantageous for Yushchenko due to his connections with Azarov. Failure in single-mandate districts, which can well be the plan of the president, will reduce Yushchenko's bloc to 60 loosely controlled seats.

The pro-presidential For United Ukraine will certainly be present in the next parliament as a single faction or as a coalition of partner parties, to which the Party of Ukrainian Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, headed by Anatoli Kinakh, joined in the course of campaign. Its current low rating may be deceptive because the name is new to the voter and closer to the election date much money and effort will be put forth to increase voter awareness. The Greens will get their guaranteed 5–6 percent of the vote. The United Social Democrats are likely to overcome the 4 percent threshold, but unlikely to receive much more than that. The USD are in a very peculiar situation. The administration is interested in using them in the parliament to keep the opposition in check and to prevent the financial resources of the group from being used against the president, but feeding Medvedchuk's presidential ambitions can hardly be a part of the strategy of the president's planners. Considering that law-enforcement agencies will do everything they can to crack the financial base of the Socialists, electoral success for the Socialists and particularly the former FNS would be surprising.

So it appears that the next parliament will not be much different from the present one. This means that although ad hoc voting coalitions against presidential initiatives will be possible, the body will remain fragmented and incapable to carry out impeachment. This is exactly the parliament Kuchma needs, one that will not threaten his political position, and one where undesirable legislation may be kept in stalemate for years. None of the forces in the parliament will be able to control it. However, when 2004 arrives, the new parliament may turn out not to be ready to issue necessary guarantees to Kuchma and his potential successor, as the newly elected Russian Duma did in early 2000. This conclusion makes more acute the only significant internal policy intrigue of Ukraine for the coming two years, namely, whether the president will really leave office in 2004 or will decide to stay for another term.