

Ukraine's New Political Colours?

Written by Marta Dyczok

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MARTA DYCZOK, DEC 19 2012

Ukraine's new Parliament convened last week, a few days before the Mesoamerican Long Count (Mayan) Calendar predicts cataclysmic or transformative events.[1] It may seem that Ukraine is experiencing a radicalization of politics seen recently throughout Europe. Both Communists and the nationalist Svoboda Party did reasonably well in the 28 October election, while the ruling Party of Regions lost its majority. But the growing radicalization in Ukraine is less about ideology and more about style of governance. For the past number of years the country has been run by a corrupt elite centered around the Regions Party, whose heavy handed tactics have led to steadily declining popular support, but also made it difficult for an effective opposition to organize. As in many countries, few ideas are being proposed by any political leaders how to steer the country through the growing global economic crisis. Society responded by refusing to deliver the establishment party its desired majority, but distributed votes among various parties and independent candidates. What remains to be seen is how the new parliament will govern.

The Results

Ukraine now has a minority Parliament. The mixed voting system is somewhat confusing. It allocates half the seats to political parties to compete for, the other half to individual candidates. Of the seats contested by parties, the Regions Party got the largest number of votes, 41.11%, but this translates into only 185 seats, well short of the 226 needed for a majority. The united opposition Bat'kivshchyna bloc came in second but well behind, with 22.44% of the vote, thus 101 seats. World boxing heavy weight champion Vitali Klitschko's party, UDAR, placed third with 8.89% (40 seats). The acronym stands for Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms but the word itself means kick, blow, or impact. The right wing Svoboda made history by becoming the first nationalist party to gain representation in Ukraine's parliament since independence in 1991, gaining 37 seats (8.22%), and the Communists increased their numbers to 32 seats (7.11%), reversing their twenty year trend of declining popularity. In the seats contested by individual candidates, some were openly affiliated with political parties, others not. As a result, there are 43 independents. Four small parties gained a few seats each,[2] and five seats are unfilled since the results were contested due to allegations of electoral fraud.[3]

The way the election was run further eroded public trust in politics. Ukrainian and international observers (except those from Russia) reported that the election "fell short of meeting international standards in some significant respects." [4] The Regions Party had changed the electoral law to its advantage, pressured mass media, and was widely accused of vote buying and other underhanded tactics. Vote counting seemed to be haunted by Stalin's ghost, who had said in 1923, 'It's not the votes that count. It's who counts the votes.' [5] Reports of procedural violations, manipulation of results, falsification of electronic data transfers, intentional delays in receiving ballot protocols, and pressure and intimidation of both precinct and district election commission members were all over the Ukrainian and international news for weeks. This also calls the accuracy/validity of the results into question.

The Establishment (Vlada)[6]

Yet despite all these tactics, the establishment did not receive a majority. So it turned to its other tactics. In 2007, the Regions Party also started with a minority, but within a few years turned it into a majority. First they formed an alliance with the Communist Party and the Lytvyn Bloc, then proceeded to coerce or bribe MPs from other parties to join them until they held a comfortable majority. Those who crossed sides are derisively known as 'tushky.' [7] In 2010

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Regions Party leader Victor Yanukovich won the presidential election and they fully consolidated power. In short measure they reversed many of the country's democratic accomplishments, completed to capture the state and its economy, and steered the country closer to Russia. While creating some economic stability, corruption became pervasive, and this led to growing societal dissatisfaction and emerging elite division. In the weeks following the recent election hard-nosed negotiations took place behind the scenes. Even before parliament convened two new 'tushky' appeared from the Bat'kivshchyna Party,[8] the Communists and a few independents agreed to vote with the Regions Party, and they gained enough votes to elect their chosen speaker, Volodymyr Rybak. The first deputy speaker's chair went to Communist MP Ihor Kaletnik, and Svoboda member Ruslan Koshulyns'kyi was selected as the second deputy. The Assembly then went on to re-appoint the old PM, the 65 year old Russophone Mykola Azarov.

The Opposition

Needless to say, such conditions make life difficult for the opposition. The most glaring example former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's seven year imprisonment after a clearly political trial. Apart from criticizing the establishment, opposition parties were unable to effectively unite during the election campaign and proposed few inspiring ideas to voters. Their combined seats fall well short of a majority (178 out of 450), and their members face pressures from the establishment to switch sides. Anticipating this, they took preventative measures before the election, making their candidates swear public oaths that they would not change sides after being elected. The day after the election Klitschko announced a coalition with the United Opposition Batkivshchyna and nationalist Svoboda party. The three leaders (Klitschko, Arseniy Yatseniuk and Oleh Tiahnybok) appeared in public together, at a public protest in the capital Kyiv, and on live television, assuring Ukrainians that they would work together in Parliament against the corrupt establishment.[9] But their ideological differences will make for an uneasy alliance. Although united in their opposition to the Regions Party, they disagree on numerous hot button issues, such as privatization of the health care system and land reform.

Ideology – The Wild Card

Ideology is the wild card in this picture. More Ukrainians voted for both left and right wing parties than in previous elections, which may be in keeping with the European trend towards radicalization of politics. However, it is hard to say whether this is a reflection of ideological preferences, or a frustration with the governing elite.

The Regions Party does not espouse a clear ideology but has developed an openly coercive style of rule that Orange Revolution organizer and now political analyst Dmytro Potekhin labeled 'Eastern Gangstership.' Economically they are post-Soviet neo-liberals, composed and financed by powerful business elites, governed by cosmopolitan corporate interests while still in the mental shadow of the Soviet legacy with little regard for rule of law. Originating predominantly from in the south and east parts of the country, they share the pro-Russian cultural affinity of the region's working class which is their electoral base. And they enjoy support from Russia. However, since being in power, apart from demonstrative acts like allowing Russia access to the Black Sea Fleet and adopting a law that favours the Russian language, they have done little to improve living standards for their traditional electorate. Consequently, this led to a decline in their popularity.

Some turned back to the Communists, who ran an election campaign using old Soviet slogans, tapping into nostalgia and positioning themselves as anti-oligarchs. This seems to have worked to some degree, despite the fact that the Communist Party of Ukraine long ago became stopped being communist in ideological terms. For years its leaders have been leading openly extravagant lifestyles, including sporting young blonde trophy wives and expensive cars, and in Parliament they vote with the neo-liberal Regions Party. It is too early to tell if their electoral success signals possible renewal. Undoubtedly some of their support came from people like my Kharkiv driver's father, who said he was fed up with the establishment but not prepared to vote for a party whose leader was in jail (referring to Tymoshenko).

Support for the nationalist Svoboda party can be explained in part as a reaction to the establishment's aggressive actions in the cultural and educational spheres. Since being in power the Regions Party reversed many policies

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introduced by previous governments and pushed through an openly pro-Russian stance. Support for the Ukrainian language in mass media and film was eliminated, university autonomy was curtailed. Education Minister Tabachnyk changed school curricula back to old Soviet historical narratives that deny Ukraine's separateness from Russia and the genocidal nature of 1932-33 Holodomor Famine. In July a controversial law that privileges the Russian language was rammed through parliament violating procedures. The Svoboda party used all of this. Although it began as an extreme right wing party espousing radical and anti-Semitic statements, during the election campaign it toned down the rhetoric, positioned itself as the party standing up for Ukrainian values, and thus attracted more moderate voters.

Democratically minded centrists opted for Klitschko's UDAR party, which stands for pro-European foreign policy, European standards in Ukraine and liberal economic policies that appealed to centrists opposed to the Regions ruling style.

The People

A worrying note is that many Ukrainians are disengaging from the formal political process. This election had the lowest voter turnout in Ukraine's recent history – 57%. Although in keeping with global trends, this is cause for concern in the still democratizing state. While there are numerous examples of non-partisan grass roots organizations like OPORA[10] (Resistance) and Chesno (Honestly)[11] that aim to improve transparency and rule of law, the establishment often agrees with their ideas then ignores them. For example the Regions Party agreed that MPs should vote in person, yet as soon as the new Parliament opened two of their deputies were caught on film inserting multiple voting cards. With media censored more than ever before in Ukraine's history, the courts and security services (like police) clearly acting in the establishment's interests, even those who previously advocated peaceful means for change are adopting the language of war.[12]

Governability?

The key question is how will this new Parliament govern? It seems that despite the new constellation of parties, the new assembly will not govern more effectively than the previous one. The establishment views the legislature as a tool for pursuing its economic interests and the opposition is in the minority. Parliamentary rules and decorum are regularly disregarded and MPs have become infamous for engaging in fistfights. The European Parliament have denounced Ukraine's recent election as 'failing to bring Ukraine closer to the EU.'[13] However, the Mesoamerican Long Count (Mayan) Calendar predicts global change. Many European countries (Greece, Spain, Italy) are facing issues of governability and the US finds itself on the edge of a fiscal cliff. Perhaps one might consider what is happening in Ukraine and beyond its borders the clash between the principles of democracy and the market that Jaques Attali wrote about back in 1997.[14]

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[1] For details see: <http://www.unian.info/news/540888-it-was-announced-about-creation-of-5-factions-in-vru-party-of-regions-batkivshchyna-udar-svoboda-and-cpu.html>;
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20712207>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20730241>

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[2] A number of these candidate were affiliated with political parties, and after being elected as independents, joined their factions.

[3] For a detailed breakdown see the Central Electoral Commission of Ukraine, <http://www.cvk.gov.ua/vnd2012/wp300pt001f01=900.html>. For a visual representation see BBC Ukrainian Service: http://www.bbc.co.uk/ukrainian/politics/2012/11/121113_parliament_2012_nk.shtml

[4] OSCE Reports: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/Ukraine/2012>; CANADEM Mission Canada Preliminary Report: http://www.canademmissions.ca/ukraine/images/documents/Preliminary%20Report_EN.pdf

[5] Quoted in *The Memoirs of Stalin's Former Secretary* (1992) by Boris Bazhanov [Saint Petersburg] (Борис Бажанов. Воспоминания бывшего секретаря Сталина)

[6] In Ukraine the term 'vlada' is commonly used to describe the group in power, translated here as establishment.

[7] A Tushka is a body of a hen or a duck or a rabbit or any other small poultry or fowl or game that is sold and bought at a market.

[8] See, 11 December 2012, *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2012/12/11/6979241/>;
<http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2012/12/11/6979245/>

[9] See 29 October 2012, live political talk show *Svoboda Slova z Andriem Kulykovym*, <http://svoboda.ictv.ua/ua/index/view-media/id/24171/current/10/total/267/page/2>

[10] See <http://oporaua.org/en/news/3126-opora-najproblemnishi-okrugy-ta-rejtyng-porushen-za-agitacijnyj-period>

[11] See: <http://www.chesno.org/>

[12] See community activist Ihor Lutsenko's blog posting explaining how going to the courts, collecting petitions fails in the face of aggression, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2012/12/13/6979604/>

[13] See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20121213IPR04603/html/EI> elections-failed-to-bring-Ukraine-closer-to-the-EU-say-MEPs

[14] Attali, Jacques. "The crash of western civilization: The limits of the market and democracy," in *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 107 (Summer 1997): 54-64

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