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Report on Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections 2012

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Introduction

Ukraine has been the territorial core of Eastern Slavs. The nations of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus emerged out of Kievan Rus and the principalities surrounding Kiev. Its history has been intertwined with the grand strategies of Russia and Poland, as it has been always treated as a land of contestation and imperial expansion for both countries. For Russia, Ukraine and particularly Kiev has symbolized the ancient roots of Russian culture, the cradle of its Orthodox heritage and its maritime exit to the Black Sea; For Poland, the locus of its imperial politics in the East and the expansion of Catholicism in the western borders of Russia. The violent annexation of Volhynia and Galicia (Western Ukraine) from Poland into the Soviet Union as part of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in 1939 altered irreversibly the ethnic and religious map of Ukraine. More specifically, it paved the way for the clashes and conflicts that were observed in Ukrainian society and politics in the aftermath of the country's post-Soviet independence.

Ukraine's Shift under President Yanukovich

Since Viktor Yanukovich's rise to the Ukrainian Presidency in March 2010, there has been a radical change in Ukrainian politics. The mottos of the Orange Revolution have been substituted with an effort to restore relations with Russia without alienating the European Union and, less importantly so, the United States. Even though Mr. Yanukovich openly committed himself to achieve a balanced stance in Ukrainian foreign policy, in reality what has been observed is a return to the Soviet style of Russian-Ukrainian relations. Ukraine is different from Russia, but not too different to shape its economic and security policy independently from Moscow.

The Kharkiv Accords of April 2010 highlighted the rapprochement with Russia.² They extended the lease of the Sevastopol military base for Russia's Black Sea Fleet until 2042. In return, Russia promised to reduce gas prices for Ukraine. Moreover, in June 2010 the Ukrainian parliament, Verkhovna Rada, passed a law blocking the country's accession to any military alliance; this practically meant a further distancing from NATO and Western military structures.³

Internal Issues and the Opposition

Yanukovich's party has ruled the country in alliance with the Communists and the Lytvyn Bloc in a far more authoritarian way compared to the former President Yushchenko. In that sense, there has been a general tendency for enhancing the executive's responsibilities.⁴ Unlike Russia, where the main problem in domestic politics is the heavy regulation of businesses by the government, in Ukraine what one observes is the exact opposite. Ukraine's oligarchs bribe constantly members of the parliament and government officials in the administration. Yanukovich's and Timoshenko's parties are reflecting exactly that trend. Instead of bribing politicians in the background, wealthy entrepreneurs become politicians themselves. This reality of course perpetuates clan politics at the central political stage with major consequences for the country's economic development. Parties are usually vehicles of their respective funders, lacking a coherent ideology.

At the same time, the style of governance has been becoming increasingly more authoritarian. Exclusion of opposition executives from mass media (through the so-called "black lists"), suppression of free press, politicization of the judiciary, violent crackdown on demonstrations, torture reports by opposition members, and the imprisonment of former PM and opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko create a very dark image of Ukraine's domestic politics.⁵ The aforementioned facts above reveal the

¹Theocharis Grigoriadis is the coordinator, and Dimitrios Moschos is an intern of the ELIAMEP Program in Slavic, Eurasian and East European Studies.

² Nathaniel Copey and Natalia Shapovalova, "The Kharkiv Accords between Ukraine and Russia, Implications for EU-Ukraine Relations", Wider Europe Working Papers, 2010.

³ Valentina Pop, "Ukraine drops Nato membership bid", euobserver.com, June 04, 2010.

⁴ Olena Prystayko, "Two years of Viktor Yanukovich in power: Observations and Conclusions of a trip to Ukraine in December 2011-January 2012", euobserver.com, February 20, 2012.

⁵ "Freedom in the World-Ukraine", Freedom House, 2012.

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government's determination to root out any effective opposition. Even though Ukrainians are highly interested in politics, the organized opposition hasn't been able to achieve unity, shattered by internal rivalries.⁶

The surprise of these parliamentary elections has been the UDAR party. UDAR is a new party, founded by world boxing champion Vitaly Klychko, and was the third party in the popular vote of the 2012 parliamentary elections. Its success can be attributed to a variety of facts. UDAR served as an alternative to the dilemma between the ruling Party of the Regions and imprisoned Timoshenko's Batkivshchyna party. Additional success came from the way some oligarchs and their media handled UDAR's case. The party was treated as a palatable opposition group that could be tolerated as long as it didn't join forces with Timoshenko.⁷ This is exactly the reason why it may be argued that UDAR is sponsored by the Party of Regions to create a façade of opposition in Ukraine. This is what United Russia has been doing the last decade with parties such as Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party or even the Communist Party of Russia itself.

Elections Procedure and Results

After such a significant turn in the Ukrainian foreign policy and amid accusations for human rights violations, elections for the 450 members of the Verkhovna Rada were held on the 28th of October. The candidacies of imprisoned opposition leaders Yulia Timoshenko and Yuri Lutsenko were rejected by the Central Electoral Committee. The elections were concluded with the Party of the Regions receiving 185 seats in the Verkhovna Rada, the Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) party 101, UDAR 40, Svoboda 37, and the Communist Party of Ukraine 32.⁸

Reports issued by international observers have all acknowledged more or less a high level of violations in the electoral procedure. The International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) characterizes the pre-election period as "a step backwards" in comparison with the last national elections, mainly due to the lack of a "level playing field". IEOM reported a low level of transparency in campaign and party funding, abuse of administrative resources, candidate intimidation, unbalanced media coverage, and limited transparency due to the CEC's closed sessions. There have also been allegations concerning bribery, vote buying, and low transparency level during the tabulation of the votes.⁹

The Case of Svoboda

It is obvious that the All-Ukrainian Union "Svoboda" (meaning "freedom") had the greatest gains from the elections, as it managed to jump from an irrelevant 0.36% in 2006 parliamentary elections to today's 10%. The Svoboda party is a far-right ultra-nationalist political group, with radical views on social and political questions. It is also alleged to have anti-Semitic views, even though it has formally denounced both anti-Semitism and xenophobia.¹⁰

The reason of its success in the recent polls shed further light on Ukrainian politics in general. It was observed that the party has historically fared very well in regions exclusively contested by parties previously supporting the Orange Revolution. However, as soon as conflicts between such parties increased, Svoboda was seen as an alternative solution by the voters, who thus turned their back to those political parties that had risen to power after 2004.¹¹

Given the party's extreme views and borderline legality, the Party of the Regions often offered media promotion to Svoboda, in order both to undermine Timoshenko's party and delegitimize the voices for a Ukraine independent from Moscow's control.¹² Additionally, the Svoboda party has received much support due to the voters' low opinion of the current political elite. The party also played the patriotism card against the government's pro-Russian policies. Last but not least, Svoboda has been the only active political group in the Ukrainian far right since the elections of 2007.

6 Anders Åslund, "Ukraine's Revolt of the Oligarchs", Project Syndicate, October 23, 2012.

7 Taras Kuzio, "UDAR - Our Ukraine Pragmatists in a Radical Opposition Era", Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 9, Issue 197, October 29, 2012.

8 Interfax-Ukraine, "Ukrainian Parliamentary Election Results published in official newspaper", Kyiv Post, November 13, 2012.

9 International Elections Observation, "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions", October 29, 2012; Pawel Kowal, "Election Observation delegation to the parliamentary elections in Ukraine", European Parliament Report, 2012.

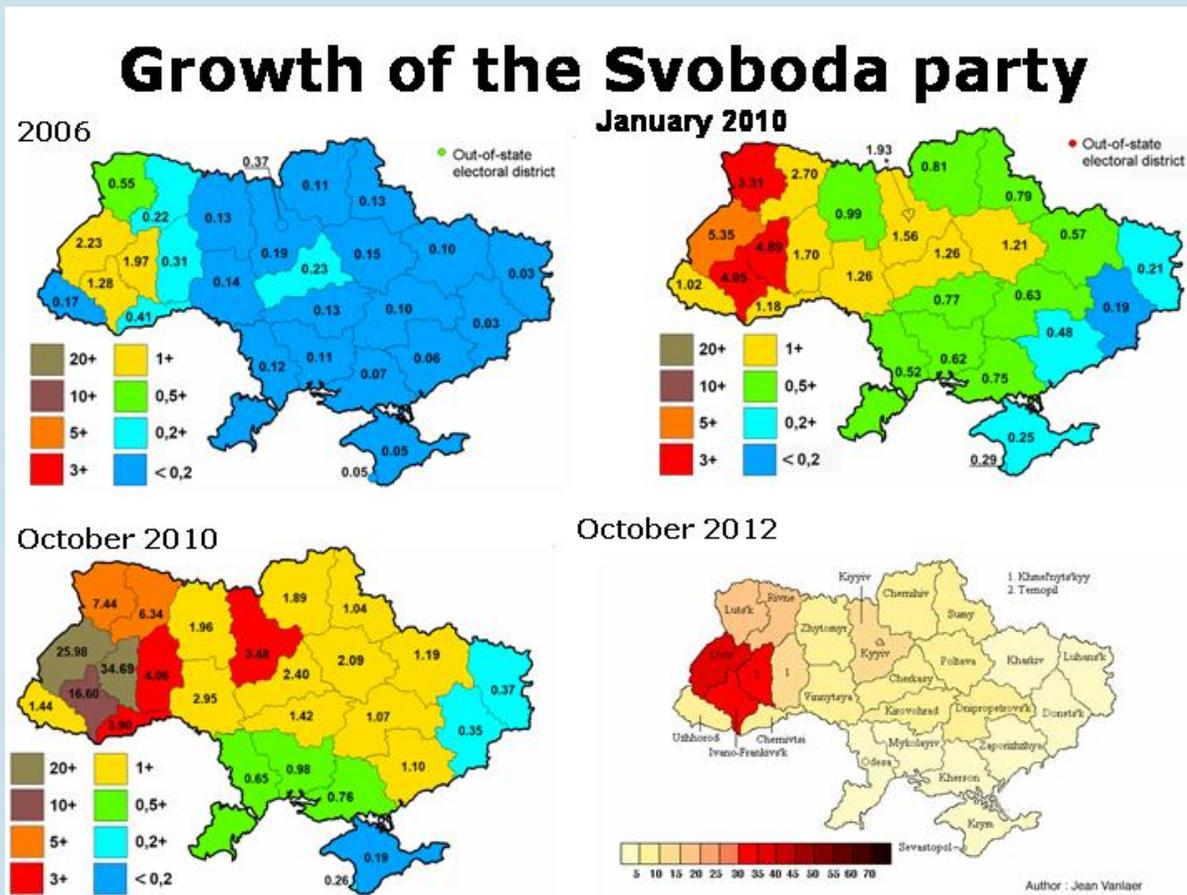
10 Elad Benari, "Anti-Semitic party gains strength in Ukraine elections", Arutz Sheva, October 29, 2012; Oksana Grytsenko, "Svoboda dismisses allegations of anti-Semitism", Kyiv Post, October 29, 2012.

11 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Ukraine: the far-right in Parliament for the first time", Open Democracy Russia, November 01, 2012

12 Ibid.

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Source: Jean Vanlaer In Asya Pereltsvaig, "Ukrainians Vote for Stronger Ties with Russia-But What About Social Issues?", GeoCurrents, November 12, 2012.

As it is shown in the comparative maps above, Svoboda’s core is situated in the west of the country, in the Ukrainian-speaking territories of Ukraine. The problematic nature of Ukrainian national identity that has been defined between its infamous historical alliance with Nazi Germany and the Soviet practices of mass killings and persecutions is reflected in the high percentages of Svoboda.

Conclusion

To conclude, the parliamentary elections of October 28 confirmed the dilemmas and instabilities that still prevent Ukraine from approaching a prosperous future. Increasing levels of corruption, an authoritarian government, and the rise of xenophobia and interethnic hatred are now officially represented in the Rada. Ukrainians will have to deal with an already divided opposition, while it still remains to be seen if Vitali Klychko’s UDAR success is a real one or simply directed by Moscow.

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