

The inauguration of the new term of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine

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On 12 December the first session of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, elected in October this year, was held. The council is made up of the following parties: the Party of Regions (210 MPs, out of whom 25 elected as independent deputies), Batkivshchyna (99 MPs, two deputies did not join the party) UDAR (42 MPs, including two independents), Svoboda (37 MPs) and the Communist Party of Ukraine (32 MPs), 24 MPs elected as independent candidates remain outside the party groupings. Volodymyr Rybak, one of the founders of the Party of Regions, became the speaker of the Verkhovna Rada. He enjoys great authority in his party but remains outside the competing groups of influence within the party. Ihor Kaletnyk from the Communist Party and Ruslan Koshulinsky from Svoboda were elected as Rybak's deputies. The Verkhovna Rada also agreed to reappoint Mykola Azarov as prime minister (by a majority of 252 votes: the Party of Regions, the Communists and 12 independent deputies). During the two-day session there was much friction and numerous blockades of the podium. In one instance this developed into an open brawl between MPs.

Commentary

- The Party of Regions has still not succeeded in obtaining ordinary simple majority (226 votes) which is indispensable for passing laws. It may be expected that the ruling party will try to "win over" further independent MPs and members of other party factions in order to secure the missing votes. However, at present the only choice available to the Party of Regions is to co-operate with the Communists, with whom they formed an alliance during their last term. Both parties have, however, many contradictory interests. The Communist Party is stronger and more confident than in the previous term and it will not support laws which may turn out to be difficult for society (including amendments to the labour law, the reform of municipal services). Should the Party of Regions fail to find the missing 16 votes required for have a simple majority in parliament, this would threaten to paralyse legislation.
- The Batkivshchyna gave a particularly severe backlash to the fact that two of its MPs who refused to join the party faction, were forced out of the session. This signals a radical objection to cases of MPs leaving opposition factions and even included the use of physical force in order to prevent these MPs from participating in sessions, though

such cases were frequent in the past.

- The first session of the Verkhovna Rada revealed that the opposition clubs (Batkivshchyna, UDAR and Svoboda) intend to make sure that the prohibition of voting for the absent MPs, confirmed by the recent changes in the parliamentary regulations, is observed. This means trouble for the Party of Regions as it has entrepreneurs in its faction who will not constantly attend parliamentary sessions. It will not however give ascendancy to the opposition as votes in the Verkhovna Rada are won by an absolute majority of the constitutional composition of the chamber, not of MPs present.
- The appointment of Ruslan Koshulinsky as deputy chairman of the Verkhovna Rada via a joint motion of the three opposition parliamentary clubs proves that the position of Svoboda within the opposition is growing. Speeches made by deputies from the opposition and action undertaken by them during the inaugural session indicate that the participation of politicians from Svoboda bears an impact on the radicalisation of the entire opposition. Svoboda's position is likely to be further strengthened by the announced establishment of the "council of the opposition" as the coordination body for the three opposition parties.