

Local government elections in Ukraine: last stage in the Party of Regions' takeover of power

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On 31 October, in elections to local government authorities in Ukraine, the Party of Regions (PR) won clear majorities in most regions and big cities. In this way the PR has brought the process of taking over power in the country to an end, after winning the presidential elections and introducing constitutional changes. The nationalist party Svoboda, which is growing into the main political force in Eastern Galicia, achieved notable success there. During the electoral campaign numerous cases of electoral manipulations and administrative constraints were noted. This electoral victory may incline the leadership of the PR to hold parliamentary elections as early as next spring.

The electoral law

This year's elections were held to councils for regions, districts, cities, housing estates and villages, residential districts in some cities, and for leaders of villages, estates and towns. In Crimea, instead of a regional council, elections were held to the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the legislative body of Crimean autonomy. In Kyiv no elections took place for council or mayor, as early elections had already been held there in 2008.

The elections were held on the basis of a mixed electoral system; 50% of the deputies were chosen in single-seat constituencies by a plurality of votes (the ordinance does not provide for a second round of voting), and 50% in multiple-seat constituencies (a proportional representation system). Only the elections to village and estate councils were based on purely majority voting. The leaders of local government associations (village mayors and council leaders) are also chosen by a plurality of votes.

The mixed electoral ordinance marks a return to a previous solution. In the most recent communal elections in 2006, a purely proportional system was in force. The return to a mixed system, with the simultaneous introduction of a law that only political parties have the right to nominate candidates for mayors and in majority votes, is convenient for the Party of Regions, as local political leaders, who previously could create their own movements of support or run as independents, now have to ensure the support of an important political party, ideally the ruling party.

The elections were organised by territorial electoral committees (the Central Electoral Commission only specifies the form of the documents); this leads to a lack of uniformity in the procedures, and limits the transparency of the electoral process. The committees can

only include members of parties represented in the current national parliament. This limits the rights of candidates who have been put forward by extra-parliamentary and local parties.

The election results

According to initial partial results (the full results should be announced by 6 November), the Party of Regions won majorities on most regional and city councils as well as most of the mayoralties (except in the west of the country), and in the elections to the Crimean Supreme Council it won a crushing victory, winning over 70% of the seats. The party of Yulia Tymoshenko, Batkivshchyna, was defeated, although it remains the main opposition force; Yushchenko's Our Ukraine, however, met with total failure.

A great success was achieved by Svoboda, a radical nationalist party, which in Eastern Galicia won the support of between twenty and thirty percent, and will be one of the main forces in the local government. Support for the communists also rose significantly (above all as a result of the low turnout, which rewards parties with rock-solid voter bases).

The electoral campaign

The first stage of the PR's preparation for the elections was taken in July 2010, when new electoral regulations were accepted which favoured large parties with extensive structures. In the election campaign, the PR also worked to ensure victory for itself by using various kinds of pressure and manipulations. From the available information, it appears that the PR guaranteed a majority for itself in most of the regional electoral commissions. These commissions frequently refused registrations, or withdrew the registrations of opposition candidates and lists, and the local authorities intervened on several occasions in internal party matters – to an extent which is permitted in law, but with clear political intent. Attempts were also made to intimidate inconvenient candidates, and there were several cases of mayors running for re-election who were arrested on charges of corruption. Irregularities during the voting and counting were not relevant, and resulted above all from poor preparation by members of the committees, as well as general disorder. International observers also pointed out to the shortcomings of the electoral regulations as one of the main problems.

Consequences of the elections

In most city and regional councils, factions of the Party of Regions or coalitions formed around them will rule. This means that local government will present policy programmes which converge with the regional organs of state administration. This will make it easier to rule the country, albeit at the price of limiting local government, which anyway is weakly developed in Ukraine.

A detailed analysis of the results of the communal elections will form the basis of whether the president and the leadership of the PR decide to call parliamentary elections in autumn

2012 or spring 2011; since the restoration of the 1996 constitution, it has been unclear on which date the elections should be held. If the PR's leadership decides that the aims it set itself at the local elections have been achieved to a sufficient extent, they may decide to call the parliamentary elections more quickly, in order to repeat their current success. The final decision should be expected before the end of November.