

Going for gold: early parliamentary elections in Ukraine

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Early parliamentary elections will be held in Ukraine on 21 July. It was President Volodymyr Zelensky who decided to take this step, dissolving parliament just two days after his inauguration. Despite doubts as to whether this decision was legitimate, the Constitutional Court has sanctioned it, submitting to both the new president's will and the mood of the Ukrainian public. Zelensky wants to capitalise quickly on his high personal support (he won 73% of the vote in the second round), and to transform his personal success into success for his Servant of the People group in the parliamentary elections (whose support at present is running at 42-48%). A very good result could even allow it to form a single-party majority in parliament. The voters' distaste for the discredited political establishment means that new parties will dominate the parliament's next term. Most of them have clear pro-European agendas, but the only pro-Russian parliamentary party is also expected to strengthen its position. As a result, parliament will be made up of deputies lacking parliamentary experience to an even greater extent than those selected in October 2014; they will have been elected in accordance to a mixed electoral system (half of the 450 deputies will come from nationwide lists, and half from single-mandate constituencies).

In search of an absolute majority

Since taking office the early parliamentary elections have become President Zelensky's most important political project, as he fears he could lose some of his support before October, when the elections were to have been held according to the constitution. These fears do have some justification, as according to most polls support for his Servant of the People party has already dropped by about 7 percentage points between April and July. Zelensky wants to take advantage of the public's still considerable demand for new faces in politics, and to complete the process which began during the presidential elections of removing the old establishment from power. The stake during these elections is the effective governance of the country, because a good result for Servant of the People will make it possible for the president to act in concert with the parliament and the government, instead of the conflicts which have been observed in recent months.

The short period between the dissolution of parliament and the election date was influenced by the way in which the president's new party was formed, as at the time of the presidential elections it only existed on paper. These deficiencies were quickly supplemented by announcing a partly-open call for the party's electoral list and some of the single-mandate constituencies. Most of the places on the electoral list were offered to members of the team of experts and volunteers who worked on Zelensky's team during the presidential election,

Zelensky's colleagues from his Kvartal-95 company, and representatives of small and medium-sized businesses. The list is headed by the party leader Dmytro Razumkov, who was Zelensky's chief political advisor during the presidential campaign. The candidates on the Servant of the People national list have good reputations or have hitherto been unknown in Ukrainian politics. The situation regarding the candidates in the single-mandate districts is rather different: the experts and members of Zelensky's team are in a tiny minority here, while the majority are local businessmen, some of whom have been implicated in scandals. In some areas, the candidates running for Servant of the People are so weak that there is a suspicion that they have been deliberately set up to lose to rivals put forward by local oligarchs. Of these, the biggest 'share' of the Servant of the People candidates belongs to Ihor Kolomoysky, who controls around twenty candidates in the single-mandate constituencies and seven or eight on the national list. As a result, the party's future parliamentary group will not be completely consolidated, coherent or ideologically united by common experience; it will rather be a collection of individuals burdened by various kinds of baggage, including corruption and ties to oligarchs. For them, the idea of the 'new Ukraine' which Zelensky is bringing to the elections will be too weak a link to forge them into a conduit of effective change.

The government camp dissolves

After five years of government, the ruling camp will leave power in a weakened and fragmented state. According to the polls, the European Solidarity group of ex-President Petro Poroshenko will enter the new parliament (7-9%); it is focused around a patriotic and radically anti-Russian electorate. Poroshenko, who is heading the list (although he will probably give up his seat), has bet on his tried and tested allies, including parliamentary speaker Andriy Parubiy, and Parubiy's deputy Iryna Herashchenko, while sacrificing his compromised business partners (who will nevertheless run as non-party candidates in single-mandate constituencies). The main coalition party, the Popular Front, will not run under its own name due to its minimal support (1%). Some politicians from this party will run under the banners of other groups, while some have even withdrawn altogether (including the former prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, and the former secretary of the National Security and Defence Council Oleksandr Turchynov); still others, such as the head of the Interior Ministry Arsen Avakov, an influential figure who has good relations with the new president, are hoping to hold on to their positions in the new government. The current prime minister Volodymyr Hroysman is running independently; his Ukrainian Strategy political project (1-2%) is based on achieving good results in the local elections scheduled for October 2020 and the next phase of parliamentary elections.

Vakarchuk: a late starter

The drop in support for Petro Poroshenko's party is partly due to the emergence of an attractive alternative – the pro-Western and free-market Voice party (4.5-8%), led by Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, the lead singer of the rock band Okean Elzy. The singer, who after long hesitation decided not to run in the presidential elections, meets the voters' expectations of new people in politics. Vakarchuk is leading an untainted team of professionals, social activists and representatives of medium-sized businesses into

parliament. His Voice party is an alternative not only to the traditional parties, but also to Servant of the People voters, mainly in western and central Ukraine, who find the message of Zelensky's party to be unserious and insufficiently anti-Russian.

The pro-Russian camp strikes back?

During the last year there has been a major reshuffle in the camp which used to support the former president Viktor Yanukovych. As a result of a split within the Opposition Bloc (2-3%), the new Opposition Platform 'For Life' party has emerged (13-14%). The Bloc was partially controlled by the richest man in Ukraine, Rinat Akhmetov. His aversion to Russia, caused by the takeover of his assets in Donbas by the so-called separatists, led to a dispute with the other, more openly pro-Russian 'stakeholders' in the party: the groups led by Yuri Boyko (the face of the party) and Dmytro Firtash (its sponsor), and the group under Viktor Medvedchuk. Akhmetov has been unable to promote his own candidates; as a result he will be seriously weakened in the next parliament, and will only control a few deputies elected from single-mandate constituencies, so he will probably seek allies among people elected on the lists of other parties. On the other hand, the ratings for the 'For Life' party have been steadily rising in recent weeks. Its candidates are proven politicians, often compromised by various corruption scandals, but who were close associates of ex-President Yanukovych. The party, which enjoys broad media support (from Inter TV and three 24-hour news channels, ZIK, NewsOne and 112), presents itself as offering constructive opposition to the inexperience of the new groups, as well as the openly anti-Russian forces. Medvedchuk, a close associate of President Vladimir Putin, has arranged meetings between Boyko, the Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev and the head of Gazprom Aleksei Miller; this creates an impression that there are chances for an imminent end to the war and a return to the old patterns of cooperation. While the party's message is very close to the Kremlin's official narrative, it has its supporters within Ukraine, particularly among those who are tired of the confrontational and anti-Russian rhetoric of both the previous government and the new President, whose foreign policy has so far been a continuation of his predecessor's.

Post-election calculations

Everything indicates that Servant of the People will be the biggest group in the new parliament, but it is unclear whether the party will manage to form an independent parliamentary majority (for which a minimum of 226 mandates is necessary), allowing the smooth creation of a new government. Servant of the People has not yet named a candidate for prime minister, although there are suggestions it could be Oleksandr Danyluk, the current secretary of the National Security and Defence Council. If they need to find additional votes in parliament, the first to offer themselves to the winners will be independent candidates from single-mandate constituencies; they will want to cooperate with the government in exchange for financial transfers from the centre to the regions. One potential candidate is *Batkyvshchina* under Yulia Tymoshenko (7.5%); so far she has refrained from attacking Servant of the People, and has limited herself to offering well-intentioned advice to the inexperienced new president. Another possible coalition partner is the Voice party. A possible coalition between Zelensky's and Vakarchuk's groups, which would be the very embodiment of a new quality in Ukrainian politics, is strongly supported by a large part of

Ukrainian civil society. On the other hand, it seems there will be no place for formal cooperation between Servant of the People and either Poroshenko's party or Medvedchuk's 'For Life'. The latter party in particular will offer strong opposition due to its political experience, clear pro-social programme and its considerable financial and media resources.