

Ukraine: crisis inside the parliament's pro-presidential camp

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There have been numerous signs that problems are growing within the parliamentary club of the Servant of the People party over the past few weeks. On 5 March the votes scheduled for the following days were cancelled, officially because deputies had to travel to the frontline in order to check the progress of building the fortifications and the organisational shortcomings in the army. According to the opposition, the actual reason was that too many members of the presidential camp would be absent; some of the deputies were abroad and some had broken club discipline. As a result, the Ukrainian parliament has seen an almost month-long break in voting on laws that are key to the wartime functioning of the state, including the law on mobilisation. The speaker Ruslan Stefanchuk and the leader of the Servant of the People parliamentary club Davyd Arakhamia also reported that some members of this party wanted to resign as MPs.

Currently, there are 401 deputies in the Ukrainian parliament (the constitution provides for 450), the lowest number in history. 235 of them formally belong to the Servant of the People club, which consisted of 254 members after the elections in 2019. 146 deputies belong to seven other parliamentary clubs or groups, and 20 remains unaffiliated. In practice, the pro-presidential faction has won votes on its own very rarely over the last two years (just 17 times). Volodymyr Zelensky's supporters are estimated at around 180 deputies, and in order to reach the minimum constitutional majority of 226 votes, support from deputies representing other parties is usually needed.

Commentary

- As the war continues, power has been further concentrated in the hands of Zelensky and a small group of his closest associates, above all the head of the President's Office, Andriy Yermak. Since 24 February 2022 the government and parliament have been gradually losing their subjectivity, even though it had already been limited in the model of power which was formed after the 2019 elections (see '[Zelensky: a recipe for the presidency](#)') they have in fact become rubber-stampers of orders given by the president or his entourage. The parliament has lost the greatest amount of importance, and now has no real influence on strategic decision-making or the personnel policy in the executive branch. Moreover, during the war, broadcasting of the Ukrainian parliament's sessions was suspended, which has effectively translated into the absence of parliamentary debate during the votes.
- This situation has discouraged many deputies (the media has given a figure of several dozen), who do not see the point in continuing to work in parliament, both for financial

reasons (the average salary with all benefits is just over \$1000) and because of the sense that they are not affecting political processes in the country. This problem primarily affects the Servant of the People group's deputies, who are a conglomerate of individuals with only one thing in common: they belonged to the 'Zelensky team' formed in 2019. During the war, contact between the parliamentary base and the president has been drastically limited (with the exception of a few individual deputies), and this has led to a decline in motivation and discipline, and thus in the ongoing decomposition of the group. In addition, antagonisms are growing between some deputies and the President's Office; these are becoming systemic, as they result from the disregard of the parliament by Zelensky's associates. The president met Servant of the People MPs for the first time since the outbreak of the war on 21 February in an attempt to fix the situation, but it did not really help to change the mood.

- At this stage, the presidential centre has not completely lost control over the parliament. This is mainly thanks to the help of deputies whose roots lie in the Opposition Platform–For Life, a pro-Russian party which was banned. In return for retaining their influence and wealth, they vote as the President's Office wants. Moreover, in the case of key laws regarding European integration or foreign aid for Ukraine, the Servant of the People party can also count on the support of other opposition factions and circles.
- It seems that over time, Zelensky's team will find it increasingly difficult to achieve a working majority of votes. If a larger group of Servant of the People deputies resign or regularly sabotage the votes, there is a risk that the problems inside the parliamentary group will turn into a deeper political crisis. It should be remembered that the Ukrainian parliament – whose term in peacetime would have expired in July 2023 – must work in its current composition until the end of the state of war (another factor which affects party discipline). This body is necessary for the functioning of the state, which is a parliamentary-presidential republic, including for the adoption of laws of fundamental importance for the defence and financial stability of Ukraine. Overcoming the crisis is primarily a task for Zelensky himself, who needs to develop more effective mechanisms of cooperation between the legislative and executive authorities in the near future.