The parliamentary elections in Ukraine, October 2014

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A R T I C L E I N F O

The Ukrainian parliamentary elections of 26 October 2014, according to international monitoring groups, "marked an important step in Ukraine's aspirations to consolidate democratic elections in line with its international commitments." (OSCE/ODHIR, 2014). The elections also produced results that can be considered ground-breaking in comparison with the outcomes of all previous elections in the post-Soviet period. These results have the potential to set the Ukrainian political process more firmly on the pro-European trajectory than at any point prior since independence. This note examines the results of the 2014 elections, identifies what can be considered its particularly consequential outcomes, and analyzes reasons for these outcomes and their possible impact on Ukraine's political future.

1. Background

On 26 October 2014, Ukrainian citizens voted in early parliamentary elections. The elections can be considered an end-point to the period of rapid and dramatic political changes Ukraine experienced over the past year. In November 2013, street protests erupted in Ukraine after then president Viktor Yanukovych decided to postpone signing the Association and free trade agreement with the European Union on the eve of the event. The street protests that became known as Euromaidan lasted for three months and culminated, during February 2014, in bloody confrontations between protesters and police, the shooting deaths of dozens of protesters by government snipers, the flight of Yanukovych to Russia, the annexation of Crimea peninsula by Russia, and the outbreak of separatist conflict in the eastern region of Donbas. Yanukovych's departure led to pre-term presidential elections in Ukraine on 25 May 2014. In this contest, Petro Poroshenko, a business tycoon and a ranking member of the Ukrainian political establishment since the late 1990s, was elected the fifth president of Ukraine on a platform of Euro-Atlantic integration, anti-corruption and market reforms, and defense of Ukrainian territorial integrity. Poroshenko received 54.7% of the votes

in the first round; his closest competitor, Yulia Tymoshenko, received 12.8%.

The Ukrainian parliament (known as Verkhovna Rada) had been elected on 28 October 2012 for a five-year term. However, the fall of Yanukovych put the issue of early parliamentary elections on the agenda. In the parliament elected in 2012, Yanukovych's Party of Regions held the most seats. Together with the Communist Party, the Lytvyn block, and some unaffiliated deputies, it formed the governing coalition. In the days after the victory of the Euromaidan protests, the Party of Regions saw massive defections from its ranks and the pro-Yanukovych majority collapsed in the Rada. On 27 February 2014, a newly-formed majority coalition of the former opposition parties and some defectors from the Party of Regions formed new governing coalition. Societal demand for parliamentary renewal — in March 2014, for example, 65.8% of those surveyed supported early legislative elections (SOCIS, 2014) — led the newly elected President Poroshenko to pledge his support for early elections. The anti-Yanukovych parties also supported early elections; they were able to create a constitutional justification for new elections by dissolving the majority coalition in the legislature. On 24 July, two parties that were members of the post-Yanukovych governing coalition, Udar and Svoboda, and dozens of individual coalition members, announced their withdrawal from the coalition. According to the Ukrainian Constitution, if a new coalition is not formed within 30 days of the previous one's dissolution, the president can dissolve parliament, resulting in early legislative elections. On 25 August, a month after the coalition liquidated itself, President Poroshenko signed a decree dissolving parliament, and called early parliamentary elections for 26 October 2014.

2. Electoral system

The 2014 elections were conducted under the same system as the 2012 elections: a mixed system, with 50% of the 450 legislative seats filled by proportional representation (based on a party list vote with a 5% threshold) and 50% of the seats filled by single-member-district races. Prior to the 2014 elections, there were unsuccessful attempts to amend the electoral law and to return to the fully proportional closed list representation system that operated in

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Table 1
Results of the parliamentary election in Ukraine, October 2014.

Party	Party list			SMD seats	Total seats won
	Votes	Votes %	Seats		
Popular Front	3,488,114	22.1	64	18	82
Petro Poroshenko's Block	3,437,521	21.8	63	69	132
Self-Reliance	1,729,271	11.0	32	1	33
Opposition Block	1,486,203	9.4	27	2	29
Radical Party of Oleh Liashko	1,173,131	7.4	22	0	22
Fatherland	894,837	5.7	17	2	19
Svoboda	742,022	4.7	0	6	6
Communist Party	611,923	3.9	0	0	0
Strong Ukraine	491,471	3.1	0	1	1
Civic Position	489,523	3.1	0	0	0
Zastup	418,301	2.7	0	1	1
Right Sector	284,943	1.8	0	1	1
Volia	n/a			1	1
Independents	n/a			96	96
Total seats			225	198	423

Note: n/a indicates parties that did not participate in the proportional component.
Source: Central Electoral Commission of Ukraine (http://www.cvk.gov.ua/).

Ukraine from 2006 to 2007, or to institute open list proportionate representation. With the implosion of the Party of Regions, former associates of Yanukovych saw better chances for securing seats in single member districts than on the party list, and several proposals to amend the electoral law failed in the parliament before the October elections (BBC Ukraina, 2013).

The fact that elections were not conducted in several electoral districts was another important feature of the 2014 vote. As a result of the Russian annexation of Crimea and the ongoing armed conflict between the Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists in the eastern Donbas region, elections did not take place in territories outside of the control of the central government: all 12 electoral districts of Crimea, nine out of 21 electoral districts in Donetsk oblast, and six out of 11 districts in Luhansk oblast did not conduct elections (Ukrains'ka pravda, 2014b). 27 of the 225 single member seats were therefore not contested in the October elections and will remain unfilled.

3. Contenders and results

As scholars of Ukrainian electoral politics have observed, during the post-Soviet period the Ukrainian party system was divided along two main cleavages: a socio-economic, left-right cleavage, reflecting divergent preferences for state intervention in the economy, and a national identity cleavage, reflecting divergent preferences in issues such as language policies, interpretations of history, and foreign policy orientation between Russia and the West (Herron, 2014). In previous elections, there was a very close balance between parties representing opposing positions on these two cleavages. Elections produced close results with only slim majorities in either direction. The 2014 elections stand out from this pattern. For the first time in the post-Soviet period, parties representing the pro-Western and pro-market axis won an overwhelming victory. Also for the first time in the post-Soviet period, the Communist Party failed to secure electoral representation. Table 1 presents election results.

As Table 1 shows, on the party list vote, six parties cleared the 5% threshold and gained legislative representation. Of these six, five formed the ruling coalition on November 27: Petro Poroshenko's Block, a pro-presidential party bearing the president's name; Popular Front, headed by Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk; Self-Reliance, the party of the popular mayor of the western city of Lviv that united some prominent anti-corruption and reform activists from the NGO sector; the Radical Party, headed by populist politician Oleh Liashko; and Fatherland, the party of the Yulia Tymoshenko, the former prime minister who was jailed on politically motivated charges under Yanukovych and freed after his downfall. All parties that formed the coalition campaigned on a platform of closer ties with the West, anti-corruption and market reforms, and opposition to the Russian actions in Crimea and Donbas. The five parties won a total of 288 seats, but the coalition formed on November 27 consisted of 302 legislators, a constitutional majority. This total was reached after a number of candidates who ran as independents joined the coalition (most of these joined the Poroshenko's Block caucus in the parliament).[1]

Opposition Block faction, composed of the elites formerly associated with the Yanukovych's Party of Regions, was left outside the coalition, as were two parliamentary groups, People's Will and Economic Development, that were formed after the parliament convened and that were composed of parliamentarians who ran as nominally independent but who are for the most part earlier defectors from the Party of Regions (The Party of Regions itself, which won the last parliamentary elections in 2012, did not register a party list for these elections.). Together, as of 8 December 2014, the Opposition Block, People's Will, and Economic Development numbered 40, 20, and 18 members, respectively. There were also 39 independent deputies who did not join any of the parliamentary groupings (Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy, 2014).

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[1] Composition of parliamentary fractions is available at (Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy, 2014).

This pro-Western constitutional majority represents a dramatic change in the legislative political landscape of Ukraine. Its emergence can be attributed to several factors: the implosion of the Party of Regions, low turnout in the areas where parties oriented towards Russia have their base, the fact that elections were not held at all in Russian-annexed Crimea and in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts controlled by Russian-backed armed separatists, and changed attitudes in Ukraine after the Euromaidan protests and Russian aggression. The implosion of the Party of Regions in the wake of Yanukovych's overthrow left voters who had traditionally supported more pro-Russian and paternalistic policies without strong candidates. In the 1990s the party system in Ukraine was highly fragmented. More recently, and in particular after 2004, the Party of Regions was the dominant force in the south and east of Ukraine, where the Communist Party placed a distant second. Shattered by defections in the wake of Yanukovych's departure, the Party of Regions decided not to compete in the October 2014 elections. Elites previously loyal to Yanukovych ran under banners of two parties — the Opposition Block and Strong Ukraine — and faced an uphill battle appealing to a disillusioned and disoriented voter base.

The poor showing of political parties oriented towards Russia can also be linked to a large drop in turnout that was particularly evident in eastern and southern regions where the Party of Regions and the Communist Party traditionally drew the bulk of their support. Nationwide voter turnout in these elections, at 52.42%, was the lowest ever in Ukraine. In the east and the south the turnout ranged from 32.4% in Donetsk to 47.9% in the Dnipropetrovsk regions).[2] The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the ongoing separatist conflict in the eastern Donbas region also boosted parties with pro-Western orientation while damaging those with a pro-Russian orientation. Ironically, in attempting to prevent Ukraine from leaving Russia's orbit, Putin's actions contributed to the emergence of the most pro-Western legislature in post-Soviet Ukrainian history in two ways: first, by cutting off many of the most Russia-friendly voters from the ballot and second, by turning public opinion in Ukraine against Russia. Crimea, now annexed by Russia, and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, now partly controlled by insurgents, are the areas of Ukraine that have historically had the most solidly pro-Russian electorate. Removing several million of these pro-Russian voters from the voter rolls deprived pro-Russian parties of their voter base. Given the number of registered voters in the 27 electoral districts where elections did not take place, over 4.5 million people who would have voted overwhelmingly for the pro-Russian parties (some 1.8 million in Crimea, 1.6 million in Donetsk, and 1.2 million in Luhansk) were unable to participate in the elections as a direct result of Russia's actions *vis-a-vis* Ukraine (Segodnya.ua, 2014).

The annexation of Crimea and Russia's role in the Donbas conflict also led to major shifts in Ukrainian public opinion that contributed to the victory of the pro-Western

parties. Polling data shows that public sentiment in Ukraine has become decidedly less pro-Russian. For example, according to a survey conducted in Ukraine in September 2014 by Gallup on behalf of the International Republican Institute, 59% of respondents favored Ukraine's membership in the European Union versus just 17% who favored membership in the customs union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan; a year ago the figures were 42% and 37%, respectively (The International Republican Institute, 2014). A November 2014 poll by Rating Group found that nation-wide, 64% of respondents supported joining the EU while 17% supported joining the Customs Union (Rating Group, 2014). Even more tellingly than this change in attitudes towards the EU, support for NATO has substantially increased in Ukraine. According to a September poll by two leading Ukrainian polling agencies, the Democratic Initiatives Foundation and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, in a hypothetical referendum on NATO membership 44% would have voted in favor, 35% against, while 22% were undecided (Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2014b). A November 2014 poll by the Rating Group found 51% of respondents supporting NATO membership and 25% opposing it. These numbers are significantly higher than those found in previous polls. Between 2002 and 2009, on average, less than 25% of Ukrainians supported NATO membership (Razumkov Center, 2009).

In addition to the poor showing of parties oriented towards Russia, another notable outcome of the October 2014 elections was the poor showing of the far right. The two far right parties, Svoboda and the Right Sector, both failed to clear the 5% threshold. Svoboda entered the parliament for the first time after 2012 elections, when it won 10.45% of the vote on the party list and another 12 seats in the single-member-district (SMD) races. With 37 seats, it controlled 8% of the total seats in the Rada. Neither Svoboda nor the Right Sector received sufficient votes to be elected on the party list this time, although several of their candidates won in SMD races, as Table 1 shows. The Radical Party roster also includes individuals associated with the far right organizations (Its poorer than expected showing—it generally ranked second in pre-election polls but came only fifth in the actual vote, with its support coming disproportionally from Liashko's home region of Chernihiv—also suggests declining support for his populist and radical message.). Overall, according to a calculation by a group of scholars of the Ukrainian far right, the number of the candidates associated with the far right elected to the Rada from all parties in these elections is 13, or just 3% of the total composition of the parliament.[3] This is a notable decline from the strength of the far right in the previous parliament when Svoboda alone controlled 8% of the legislative seats.

Finally, another consequential result of the October 2014 elections was the poorer than expected showing of the president's party, Petro Poroshenko Block, on the party list vote where it placed a close second after the party of Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk. Relative to the May 2014

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[2] Turnout data by region is available on the website of the Central Electoral Commission of Ukraine at http://www.cvk.gov.ua/pls/vnd2014/wp084?PT001F01=910.

[3] Data by Anton Shekhovtsov made available on his Facebook page on 28 October 2014. https://www.facebook.com/anton.shekhovtsov/ppnref=story.

presidential elections that Poroshenko won in the first round receiving 54.7% of the votes, a result of 22.8% for his party in October demonstrates a noticeable drop in support. This decline may indicate disillusionment with President Poroshenko, possibly because some of his key campaign promises, such as ending the war in the east, have not been fulfilled. Yatseniuk's Popular Front did significantly better than expected as in most pre-election polls it was not even polling second.[4] The pre-election polls showed a large number of undecided voters intending to participate − 33% as of the middle of October (Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2014a). It is possible that many of these voters were broadly supportive of the post-Euromaidan government, but not firmly committed to any one party, and some decided at the last minute to vote for Yatseniuk's party. The Poroshenko Block may also have been hurt by perceptions about corruption in the party, and the extent of its links with Yanukovych-era elites. Before the elections, Poroshenko was criticized in the media for poor management of nominations in the single-member-district races that allowed Yanukovych-era elites to win. He also faced criticism regarding the nomination of a member of the outgoing parliament who voted for the infamous laws of January 16 that essentially outlawed protests during Euromaidan and led to an escalation in violence (Hromadske.tv, 2014; Nashi Groshi, 2014).

4. Implications

The results of the 2014 legislative elections impinge on several important issues in Ukrainian politics. One issue is the regional divide. The regional divide has been a persistent and defining feature of Ukrainian electoral politics, with the eastern and southern regions of the country voting for parties and politicians advocating closer ties with Russia, and the western and central regions supporting closer ties with the West. In these elections the regional divide has not disappeared. As the district-level voting results show, the Opposition Block won on the party list vote in every single electoral district in Luhansk and Kharkiv in the east, in nearly every district in Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia, and did well in several other eastern and southern regions, in particular Odesa and Dnipropertrovsk.[5] Furthermore, the pro-Russian sentiment in this part of the country can be assumed to be stronger than the support registered for the Opposition Block in this election. The implosion of the Party of Regions left its voters disoriented and without strong alternatives, and many likely stayed home (as is evidenced by low turnout in these regions). If a new pro-Russian party emerges and consolidates itself before the next round of elections, it could perform

substantially better than the Opposition Block did in these elections and accentuate the regional divide.

However, the October 2014 election results also show that the regional divide changed significantly. Comparing combined vote totals obtained by the pro-Russian and pro-Western parties in 2012 and 2014 shows that the border between "west" and "east" has shifted substantially eastward. In dozens of electoral districts in the eastern and, in particular, in the southern regions, pro-Western parties gained more votes than pro-Russian parties in 2014. In 2012, in all but one electoral district in the south and the east pro-Russian parties collectively won more votes than pro-Western parties. In 2014, in contrast, in southern Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson oblasts, and in eastern Dnipropetrovsk oblast, pro-Western parties combined won more votes in almost every electoral district within these regions. The same shift can also be observed in some electoral districts in Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv oblasts.[6] If this shift is indicative of changed attitudes as described above, the regional divide in Ukraine may now be more accurately described not as east versus west, but as a reduced east versus the rest.

In addition to regional polarization, the 2014 elections also affect the likelihood of reforms in Ukraine. The Yanukovych regime left the country's resources plundered, the economy in severe crisis, and corruption endemic. Whether the much-needed reforms are going to be implemented is one of the main questions Ukrainians and Ukraine-watchers are asking themselves. The elections of October 2014 may strengthen the prospects of reforms in Ukraine because the new governing coalition's declared commitment to reforms is combined with an unprecedentedly strong legislative majority. This increases the likelihood that reform measures will be passed even if not all members of the coalition are supportive. At the same time, there remains a danger of conflict between the president and the prime-minister. After the fall of Yanukovych, Ukraine reverted to the 2004 constitutional changes that Yanukovych invalidated in 2010, and replaced the presidential system with the presidential-parliamentary one. In this dual executive system, if a potential conflict between president and prime minister takes severe form, as it did in Ukraine between 2005 and 2010, this could lead to gridlock and stall reforms. President Poroshenko and Prime Minister Yatseniuk are presently allies, but there have been media reports of frictions between their parties over the terms of the coalition agreement and posts in the new government (Ukrains'ka pravda, 2014a). It remains to be seen if Ukraine will escape the paralyzing gridlock it experienced during 2005–2010, when President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko − allies during the orange revolution that brought Yushchenko to power − became bitter rivals locked in a perpetual tug of war that paralyzed government policy making, alienated voters, and enabled Yanukovych to return to power in the 2010 presidential elections.

Finally, the poor showing of the two far right parties in the 2014 elections does not lay to rest the threat from the

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[4] In the September 2014 poll by International Republican Institute the party polled fifth (The International Republican Institute, 2014), and in October 2014 poll by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation the People's Front polled third (Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2014a).

[5] Without Crimea's 12 districts, there are 213 electoral districts in Ukraine. District-level results are available on the Ukrainian Central Electoral Commission's web site at http://www.cvk.gov.ua/pls/vnd2014/wp005pt001f01=910.html.

[6] This can be ascertained from district-level voting results in 2012 and in 2014 parliamentary elections on the Central Electoral Commission's web site http://www.cvk.gov.ua/.

far right to the country's prospects of democratic development. The fact that neither Svoboda nor the Right Sector managed to win representation on the party list vote shows that, despite their increased visibility (resulting from their actions — including violence — during the Euromaidan protests), radical nationalist ideology remains a minority view in Ukraine. Svoboda's electoral success in 2012 may have been more a product of the political climate of that time rather than an indication of a rise in nationalist beliefs among voters. At the time of the 2012 parliamentary elections, Yanukovych was on the offensive, busily consolidating power and eliminating opposition. With the 2004 constitutional reform annulled, Tymoshenko imprisoned, the Russian Black Sea Fleet's lease extended, the controversial law on Russian language rammed through the parliament, and authoritarianism creeping, the mainstream opposition was widely regarded as toothless and unable to stop Yanukovych's power grab and perceived sell off of Ukraine's interests to Russia. Svoboda capitalized on this sentiment, positioning itself as the most committed anti-Yanukovych party. With Yanukovych out and Svoboda both mired in corruption allegations and lacking in specific and demonstrable reform accomplishments, many of the voters who elected it to oppose Yanukovych in 2012 had little reason to vote for it again in 2014. At the same time, the far right retains influence in Ukraine despite its meager share of electoral support. There have been controversial appointments of right wing actors to positions of authority in governing organs, and there are armed volunteer battalions associated with the right wing groups fighting pro-Russian separatists in the east (BBC, 2014). The danger that members of these battalions may be used as private militias to settle political or economic scores became reality shortly after the elections. In March 2015, the banking magnate and billionaire Igor Kolomoisky, governor of strategic Dnipropetrovsk region who has financed a number of volunteer battalions, ordered masked armed men to storm the headquarters of state-owned oil company after a new law passed by parliament threatened his de-facto control of the company (BBC, 2015). President Poroshenko vowed not to allow any governor a "pocket army" and sacked Kolomoisky, an important ally (Financial Times, 2015). The danger to the weak and corrupt state from combat-hardened radicals and their political sponsors remains, however. It cannot be excluded that these combat-hardened radicals may in the future try to confront a government in Kyiv that fails to deliver on pre-election promises of clean government, rule of law, and economic recovery. In this regard, prospects for meaningful reforms and the extent of danger from the far right are closely linked: more effective reforms will diminish the appeal of populist and radical calls for violent action, while a stalled reform process and government infighting will make the radical right more influential and more dangerous.

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