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Mobilisation for elections in Ukraine: Risk-assessment in frames of the military conflict

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Introduction

On July 24th two parliamentary factions left the “European choice” coalition in the Ukrainian parliament.[1] This coalition was formed in February as a result of the Maidan protests. On August 25th, after a month of the coalition breakup, president Poroshenko exercised his constitutional right to dissolve parliament and call for elections, which are likely to be held on October 26th.

These elections occur in exceptional circumstances, as they will be held in a country with both the ongoing military conflict and recent memory of the Maidan protests. The upcoming parliamentary elections, similarly to any other major political event in Ukraine at this time, are of great importance to the West in analysing the escalating tension between Ukraine and Russia. It is crucial to understand how the elections can influence the resolution of the conflict in the Eastern and Southern-Eastern Ukraine. Additionally, the outcome of these elections will have serious implications for Ukraine’s foreign policy course, particularly in Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Due to the relevance of assessing the risks of the upcoming parliamentary elections in Ukraine, this brief contains three themes: 1) the overview of risk factors which affect the elections; 2) analysis of the implications that the military conflict in the Eastern and Southern-Eastern Ukraine has for the Ukrainian state and pre-term parliamentary elections; 3) assessing the potential influence of far-right political parties and groups in the upcoming elections.

Complexity of Situation

The pre-term parliamentary elections in Ukraine will be held in an exceptionally complex context. Under normal circumstances, the pre-term electoral process can be rather stressful for the state; for instance, it requires the unforeseen mobilisation of budget resources and electoral infrastructure. In the case of Ukraine, the objective characteristic of pre-term elections is aggravated by the following factors: 1) the ongoing military conflict in the Eastern and Southern-Eastern Ukraine; 2) ambiguity of Crimea’s political status; 3) the post-Maidan effect.

On the one hand, there is an opinion that the first two risk factors make the pre-term elections inadvisable, because during the electoral campaign Ukrainian politicians

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would implement the actions, which benefit their electoral support rather than the national interests and resolution of the military conflict.[2]

On the other hand, some experts emphasise the necessity of the pre-term elections due to the 'post-Maidan' effect.[3] As a result of the recent protests, Ukrainian civil society actualised the importance of comprehensive checks for corruption and treason of national interests, which would target politicians, civil servants and judges.

It is of note that pre-term parliamentary elections were one of the most crucial demands of the protesters.[4] The main argument against the existing parliament is that its pro-Yanukovich majority voted for the undemocratic laws of January 16th 2014, which triggered a further escalation of the Maidan protests. According to the recent survey, 72% of Ukrainian citizens consider that the pre-term parliamentary elections are necessary.[5]

Most importantly, the parliament, elected in 2012, has lost its electoral legitimacy, particularly after the Maidan events.[6] 171 out of 450 MPs crossed the floor to another faction.[7] The escalating military conflict has demonstrated the lack of flexibility, consolidation and political will in the political decision-making of the parliament.

At the moment, there are two main causes of the increasing social tension in Ukraine: the ongoing military operation and unfulfilled Maidan demands. The cumulative effect of these factors creates a risk of a social explosion, which imposes a serious pressure on the incumbent authorities.

Effects of the Conflict: Destabilisation and Consolidation

The ongoing military conflict with what remains an unpredictable outcome has a hugely destabilising effect on Ukraine. Primarily, this matter is shaping the state agenda of decision-making and budget expenditures.

The military operation in the Eastern and Southern-Eastern Ukraine has several implications for the upcoming elections. Firstly, the elections would impose an additional burden on the budget, which is mobilised in order to cover the expenditures on the 'Anti-terrorist operation', Ukrainian army and post-conflict reconstruction.

Secondly, the Ukrainian citizens of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions have been moving to other regions, Russia and neighbouring states for protection and the pursuit of a living. According to the UN statistics, 260 000 Ukrainians moved to other regions in Ukraine because of the conflict.[8] The increasing mobility of Eastern-Ukrainian refugees raises the issue of the voting turnout on the day of elections and their legitimacy in the Eastern Ukraine.

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Finally, the technical aspect of holding elections in Donetsk and Luhansk regions is rather challenging, as it implies the establishment of electoral infrastructure in a politically unstable area. Apart from this, there is a risk that the transparency of the elections in this region will not be adequately monitored.

The ambiguity of Crimea's political status is another factor which affects the upcoming elections. De facto Crimea is a republic of the Russian Federation, however, according to the law of Ukraine, Crimea is a temporary occupied Ukrainian territory.[9] This implies that the upcoming parliamentary elections cannot be organised in Crimea, but Crimean voters can exercise their right to vote on the territory of Ukraine.[10]

The pre-term elections are likely to be held in the frames of the existing mixed electoral system, which means that a half of the MPs are elected through a proportional system with closed party lists and a five-percent electoral threshold, and the other half through a majoritarian electoral system. In this case, Crimeans will be able to vote for proportional party lists, however, they will not have majoritarian representatives in the Ukrainian parliament. As a result, the number of MPs decreases from 450 to 438.[11] Provided the Crimean peninsula is envisaged as a part of Ukraine in the future, the absence of Crimean representatives in the Ukrainian parliament implies a risk of deepening the conflict between Kyiv and Crimea.

The incomplete parliament of the next convocation is likely to face the challenges of conflict resolution and post-conflict adjustments. Traditionally, the Ukrainian parliament is composed of pro-European and pro-Russian groups of MPs, which take up the governing or oppositional side in rotation. In such a way, the parliament is supposed to reflect the interests and orientations of all the Ukrainian regions. However, due to the Maidan events and escalating conflict between Ukraine and Russia, the existing pro-Russian parties are discredited in the eyes of the public, which is illustrated by a significant decline of their electoral support. This affects the configuration of the new parliament, particularly, the emergence of a wide pro-European majority, and implies the risk that the position of the Eastern and Southern regions might not be adequately articulated in the parliament.[12]

Despite all the risks emerging from the military conflict, it is worthy of note that the public discourse of the conflict in Ukraine has had a consolidating impulse for the Ukrainian society. Taking into account the fact that the Kremlin is perceived as the generator of separatist movements in the Eastern and Southern-Eastern Ukraine, as well as the supplier of military forces and weapons, the common threat to the national and individual security is efficient in bringing up patriotic feelings and actions among Ukrainian citizens.

This consolidating trend is likely to affect the new parliament by bringing together political rivals into a wide pro-European coalition, which would form the government. However, once the military conflict is over, there is a risk that the wide coalition would break up.

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Assessing the Risk from the Far Right

The narrative of the pressing threat from the far right in Ukraine has been actualised both in Russian and Western public discourses. The two main subjects evoking concerns are the All-Ukrainian Union “Freedom”, which holds 37 out of 450 parliamentary seats, and the coalition movement Right Sector, which consists of national conservative and marginal far right groups.[13] Founded in 1991, the “Freedom” party entered parliament only in 2012 as the opposition. The Right Sector emerged in November 2013 and gained public attention due to its participation in the Maidan movements on the side of the protesters.

The reasoning behind the rise of international concerns is rational at first sight. Firstly, the Maidan movement escalation showed the increasing participation of nationalistic organisations and their paramilitary groups. Along with the national flag and anthem, the symbols of the protests included the red and black flag of Ukrainian nationalists, as well as their slogans. Additionally, one of the stage political leaders of the Maidan protests O. Tyahnybok is the head of the nationalist “Freedom” party.

Secondly, the “Freedom” party is a parliamentary political actor holding three out of twenty ministerial portfolios.[14] After the protests, the Right Sector started its transformation into a political actor. Its leader D. Yarosh ran for presidency in the recent presidential elections. Despite the fact that the Right Sector is not a registered political party at the moment, it can potentially participate in the next parliamentary elections.

However, this line of reasoning does not seem comprehensive enough. The presidential elections in May showed that O. Tyahnybok gained 1,16% of public support, and D. Yarosh was voted by 0.7%, which means that after the Maidan protests the demand for nationalistic and radical right politicians is rather low.[15]

In the wider context of Ukrainian politics, far right groups have remained marginal throughout the history of Ukrainian independence, and the fact that the “Freedom” party obtained 10% of popular vote in 2012 can be considered exceptional rather than consistent.[16] It is crucial to point out that this phenomenon can be explained not by the increasing popularity of nationalistic ideology, but by the balance of political powers in Ukraine.

By 2010, when V. Yanukovich became the president, the “orange” political elite had lost most of its credibility in the eyes of the public. The growing discontent with the policies of the president and his party, as well as the discredited opposition, motivated the Ukrainian electorate to look for “new faces” with a strong political stance.[17] Under such circumstances, the rhetoric of national interests and severe anti-Yanukovich criticism from the side of the “Freedom” party, which has a remarkable party discipline, met the public demand for a political alternative.[18]

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In the post-Maidan reality, the popularity of the “Freedom” party is lower than during the presidency of Yanukovych. According to the polling conducted in August, in the upcoming parliamentary elections 5-6% of Ukrainian voters would support the “Freedom”.^[19] This can be explained by the fact that with the ouster of Yanukovych the party lost its main electoral advantage – anti-regime criticism, and that its ideological platform does not have a national support.^[20]

As for the role in the Maidan movement, it is worthy of note that the protests were not initiated by the radical right. As a matter of fact, the movement had a strong impulse from the left, because it aimed at establishing social justice, the rule of law and ousting the authoritarian leader.^[21] People of various ethnic and religious backgrounds speaking Ukrainian and Russian were united by the common goal to implement systemic reforms.^[22] The “Freedom” and Right Sector supporters were a part of the wider social movement, which initially had a democratic and pro-EU platform.^[23] While the members of the two nationalistic organisations participated in peaceful actions, armed clashes and enrolled in the Maidan “self-defense”, they did not shape the ideology of the protests, but shared its anti-regime character.

The tolerance of the “Freedom” and Right Sector to the EU, unlike traditional eurosceptic European nationalist parties, can be explained by the specific feature of Ukrainian nationalism. Similarly to European concept of nationalism, Ukrainian nationalism is socially conservative and contains far-right populism, however its distinctive pillar is anti-imperialism, which implies Ukraine’s liberation from “Russia’s hegemony”.^[24]

Ukraine’s political and economic independence from Russia is a common value for a broad range of political organizations, including those which could be described as nationalistic.^[25] The far-right participation in the Maidan movement shows that the nationalistic groups perceived the EU Association Agreement as the means to guarantee Ukraine’s independent development.^[26]

In summary, radical right and nationalistic political parties and movements do not have a wide national support; therefore, their chances to enter parliament after the upcoming elections are rather low.

Implications of the Risk-Assessment

The military conflict in the Eastern and Southern-Eastern Ukraine is a destructive and destabilising factor for the Ukrainian state.

The role of the upcoming parliamentary elections should not be underestimated for several reasons:

1) the elections will serve as a means to relieve accumulated social tension, and, therefore, their results will reflect emotions and the conjunction of situational factors;

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2) new parliament and government will face the following challenges:

post-conflict reconciliation; preventing a further alienation of the Eastern and Southern-Eastern regions by guaranteeing that their interests are adequately reflected in the policy-making; elaborating a political, economic and information strategies on reintegrating and reanimating Donetsk and Luhansk regions; implementing systemic reforms and maintaining the course of European integration; stabilising Ukraine's foreign policy towards Russia.

For Western policy-makers these conclusions have the following implications: Western states and international organisations should provide monitoring assistance and support in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

The political potential of radical right parties and groups in Ukraine is rather low at the moment; instead, the parties with populist anti-war and anti-Russia rhetoric might gain electoral support (for instance, the Radical Party of O. Lyashko)

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