

Ukrainian politics: the balance of forces after three years of war

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The political situation in Ukraine is determined primarily by the ongoing war, and the situation of stalemate at the front is raising the level of public impatience. President Petro Poroshenko has consolidated the overwhelming majority of power in his hands, but he is not using it to fulfil his election promises; rather he is focused on strengthening his position. The significant weakening of the People's Front, the coalition partner of the Petro Poroshenko Bloc, as well as the majority of opposition parties has contributed significantly to this state of affairs. Prime Minister Volodymyr Hroysman remains dependent on the head of state, although he has gradually been strengthening his own political position. This has been accompanied by an increase in the importance of the Presidential Administration and the apparatus of the state, whose staff follow the President's lead. We may also note a rise in the importance of the interior minister Arsen Avakov, who is also building up his own political position while remaining in the shadows. The political determination of the organisations of veterans of the war in Donbas is also noticeable, as is that of the nationalists. Moreover, preparations for the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections are becoming increasingly important. The president's team are primarily focused on preventing the emergence of any new significant political forces which could threaten the balance of power created after the Revolution of Dignity. It seems that there will be no dissolution of the parliament or change of government in the coming months, a factor which will deepen the present stagnation of the process of reforming the country.

War fatigue

Three years after the outbreak of the war in the Donbas, and two since the Minsk agreement which froze the situation at the front, public impatience and antipathy towards the government are rising, with the latter being blamed (not without reason) for reaping the benefits of the ongoing situation of 'neither war nor peace'. The mood of Ukrainian society, including its political elites, is closely related to the situation around the Donbas, which has pushed dissatisfaction with the deterioration of living conditions into the background, and is expressed by an almost total lack of protest at the economic situation.

Support is growing among the political class for the recognition of the separatist 'republics' as occupied territories, and even for breaking off all economic cooperation and diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation. In mid-March, President Poroshenko decided to authorise a 'social' blockade of trade with the separatist part of the Donbas, which had been launched by veterans' militias.

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a possible new attempt to liquidate the 'republics' by force. In addition, the armed forces are feeling more and more confident; they are both morally and organisationally ready to engage in offensive activities, although their command must be aware that once they gain the upper hand over the separatist forces, regular Russian units will rejoin the fighting.

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Among civil society organisations, there is increasing opposition to leading politicians and entrepreneurs using the war as a pretext to abandon or slow down reforms, especially those targeted against corruption and the process of so-called de-oligarchisation, for which there is huge social demand.

The presidential camp and its allies

In April 2016, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, a strong and independent politician, and leader of the People's Front party, was replaced by Volodymyr Hroysman, a close associate of Poroshenko who had little experience in national politics. In this way, the President of Ukraine became the main political player in the country. Poroshenko has skilfully exploited his wide-ranging prerogatives (such as his influence on the armed forces and the public prosecutor's office), but he has sometimes also acted at the fringe of legality; for example, he blocked the election of new members to the Central Electoral Commission (this body currently lacks a valid quorum, which prevents it from taking important decisions/choices).

The Presidential Administration has become the principal location for conducting political and economic interests, weakening the role of the government (which had been much greater during Yatsenyuk's premiership) and the parliament. The role of the Presidential Administration in the state has not been so great since Leonid Kuchma's second term.

Initially regarded as merely the president's tool, Prime Minister Hroysman quickly gained a relatively independent position, often opposing suggestions and pressures from the officials of the Presidential Administration, and he is now striving for the status of 'junior partner' to the head of state. His position has been strengthened by the fact that the current parliament has been unable to elect a new prime minister; thus Hroysman's resignation would lead to early elections. 14 April marked one year since parliament's approval of the government's programme, after which point it would have been theoretically possible to dismiss the government, but this should not be expected, for the reasons stated above.

The Petro Poroshenko Bloc (BPP) has become another 'government party', which has no political programme, but instead represents the interests of the state apparatus (at both central and local levels), the importance of which is rising both in relation to the conduct of the war and a certain weakening of the political role of the oligarchs. The few activists of the Revolution of Dignity who won parliamentary mandates on the BPP list have no influence on party politics, and are increasingly acting as if they were in opposition.

The president and his team have been boosted by the weakening of the BPP's parliamentary coalition partner, the People's Front, which currently has around 1-2% of support in the polls. This grouping has never formed a coherent party, but consists of several groups focused around its strongest politicians, including Yatsenyuk and the interior minister Arsen

Avakov; Andriy Parubiy, the speaker of parliament, clearly has no ambition to play a political role corresponding to the formal position of the 'number two' in the state. The aim of the People's Front is now to survive, in the hope of rebuilding voter confidence as the memory of Yatsenyuk's rule fades.

The People's Front remains in the coalition mainly to prevent early elections; breaking off its cooperation with the BPP would make such a step inevitable. The former prime minister's party retains significant influence within the state apparatus (including on state-owned companies), and also has an extensive party structure which could play a major role in both the election campaigns scheduled for 2019. Thus, the weakening of Yatsenyuk's party, or (the currently unrealistic) subordination of its structure to the president, would be in the latter's interests.

Arsen Avakov, who has been interior minister since February 2014, earned great credit in the first phase of the war, by sponsoring the volunteer battalions among other things. He is undoubtedly the leader of the informal 'war party', as well as co-leader of the People's Front alongside Yatsenyuk; he may well become a strong candidate for the presidency.¹ As such, he poses a threat both to Poroshenko and to Yatsenyuk, although neither of them can openly oppose him, in order not to bring about the breakup of the People's Front, which at present would be unfavourable to both politicians.

¹ At present Avakov is not seen as a potential candidate, and as such has not been listed in opinion polls (in December 2016, the main candidates, Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, were each supported by about 15% of respondents who declared their readiness to vote). http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/obschestvenno-politicheskaya_situaciya_v_ukraine.html, accessed 13 March 2017

The situation of the opposition

The opposition parties have been finding it hard to pull themselves together in the present situation, and are committed to maintaining the *status quo*, and above all to freezing the party scene in its present form. Yulia Tymoshenko hopes to once again lead any mass opposition to the government's policies (and to provoke any such protests in the future), but for now she is not taking any steps in this direction, confining herself to demagogic speeches in parliament and the media. Meanwhile Oleh Lyashko's Radical Party is increasingly clearly working (unofficially) with the presidential camp, although this has not stopped Lyashko from using populist rhetoric, directed at the President among others.

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The Opposition Bloc is engulfed in apathy: its leadership is clearly unable to learn the lessons of the past three years' events, nor to identify whose interests it should now represent: those of the shrinking pro-Russian electorate, of Rinat Akhmetov or of Дмитро Фірташ. The withdrawal of Firtash (one of the leading oligarchs) from Ukrainian politics has significantly weakened the party and undermined the position of the politicians leading it, who were close associates of the oligarch.

Of the oligarchic groups which had previously been of the greatest importance, only two are currently of any relevance: those of Igor Kolomoyskiy and Rinat Akhmetov. The former, although he is currently at loggerheads with the president, remains one of the most important players on the Ukrainian political scene, among

other reasons because he has influence in many political parties. His support in the 2019 elections will cost a great deal, and he will be uninhibited about choosing the candidate he supports.

Akhmetov, who is still a semi-official supporter of the Opposition Bloc, has been severely weakened both economically (including by the blockade of trade with the Donbas) and politically, and also because he was clearly unable to respond quickly and decisively; he has now been reduced to expecting a change in the sequence of events, instead of influencing it himself. He also lacks political ambition and ability, but remains a valuable source of funding for political projects.

From time to time the media circulate rumours about the creation of new political parties, which are mainly assumed to cater to the pro-Russian and radical leftist electorates. It seems, however, that these now serve mainly to compromise projects that could jeopardise the Opposition Bloc on the one hand, or the ruling camp on the other; the latter does not want to create a political power that could appeal to this electorate while having no links to the Yanukovich regime.

The other goal of the behind-the-scenes activities is to prevent the emergence of a strong grouping which would support reforming the country along European lines, and above all effectively fight corruption. The Revolution of Dignity has not led to the emergence of a strong political group which is genuinely capable of enforcing the programme it stood for. Meanwhile, the war has increased support for radical nationalists – both of the traditional branch, who align themselves with the tradition of the OUN (mainly the *Svoboda* party), and the new branch, who use the slogans of the contemporary radical European right (mainly the so-called Azov Movement). However, it will be easy to set these groups against each other as they try to build a common front, by playing on their policy differences and the ambitions of their leaders.

Prospects for the 2019 elections

Presidential elections should be held in Ukraine in March 2019, and parliamentary elections in October the same year. As a result, the preparation for both electoral campaigns is becoming an increasingly important element of the political manoeuvres in Kyiv. There is no doubt that Petro Poroshenko will run for re-election; his main rival is Yulia Tymoshenko, who for a long time has had levels of support in opinion polls similar to those of the president, leaving the other politicians behind². Consequently, we may expect attempts by the presidential camp to promote other radical populists, with the aim of breaking up Tymoshenko's electorate.

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Any other attempt at a serious candidature can only come from a pro-European party. The inability to hold elections in Crimea and the separatist-controlled areas will deprive the pro-Soviet and Communist presidential candidates of any hope.

At the moment, President Poroshenko's main goal seems to be preventing parliamentary elections from being called early. This is why he has delayed the restoration of the legitimacy of the Central Electoral Commission (of its fifteen members, only two have not exceeded their term in office), and postponed work on bills concerning the impeachment process and the new parliamentary electoral law (both were obligations included in the 2014 coalition agreement). The president wants to gain time – he is probably waiting for his opponents to make mistakes, especially potential competitors

² For example, in the Rating Group's poll in December 2016, Tymoshenko was supported by 10.6% of respondents, Poroshenko by 8.8%; next came Yuriy Boyko with 6.1%. 24% said they would not vote, and 15.3% were undecided.

within his own camp – while trying to provoke them into such errors.

Since February 2016, the government coalition has not had an absolute majority in parliament which is required by constitution³. In individual votes, the BPP and the People's Front have been supported by parties consisting of former members of the Party of Regions (apart from the Opposition Bloc) which are controlled by oligarchs, and by independent MPs. Concluding a formal coalition agreement with these groups might be acceptable to the BPP (though it would cause many deputies to leave and lead to a serious loss of image), but it would certainly be unacceptable to the People's Front, without which no coalition could be formed.

However, the lack of the required number of formal coalition members (226 deputies, i.e. at least 50% of the constitutional members of parliament) undermines the legitimacy of both the

government and parliament itself. The Constitution of Ukraine stipulates that the existence of such a coalition is mandatory; it does not allow for the rule of a minority government, and the lack of an agreed coalition is a premise for early elections (although the president has only the right, and not the obligation, to dissolve parliament). Although in the present situation early parliamentary elections appear to be a natural solution, nothing suggests they will imminently be called. The main reason for this seems to be that no party or bloc of parties can count on them bringing definite success. Postponing the parliamentary elections until the constitutional deadline gives practically all political forces (including those aspiring to seats in parliament) both the time and the hope of increasing their support; in addition, parties that put up serious candidates in the preceding presidential elections will gain additional political benefits.

³ As of 6 April, the Poroshenko Bloc has 141 deputies and the People's Front 81, 4 short of the required majority of 226.

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