

The Ukrainian Parliamentary and Presidential Elections of 1994

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In March and April 1994, Ukraine held its first parliamentary elections as an independent state. In June the country held its second presidential election, which brought about the first transfer of executive power. Given the dire state of the Ukrainian economy, it was virtually inevitable that this series of elections would produce a massive turnover of political personnel. Bearing in mind the recent examples of Poland, Lithuania, and Hungary, in which elections returned socialists to power, it should come as no surprise that Communists and Socialists together make up the largest bloc in the new Ukrainian parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*). Significantly, however, Ukraine did not choose a socialist as its new president, opting instead for Leonid Kuchma, head of the Union of Industrialists and Businessmen and a self-proclaimed advocate of rapid economic reform. The discrepancy between the electorate's choice of legislators and its choice of executive can be explained in large part by the country's electoral system, which encouraged voters to vote for individuals rather than political parties, and thus reinstated many of those who were best known as local leaders under the old regime.

Background

In August 1991 Ukraine declared independence, a move sanctioned by over ninety per cent of the population in a referendum held the following December. This referendum coincided with the first presidential election in the new country, in which Leonid Kravchuk, the former chief ideologue of the Ukrainian Communist party, was elected president on 61.6 per cent of the vote. The parliament with which Kravchuk was obliged to work had, however, been elected in the spring of 1990 when Ukraine was still an integral part of the Soviet Union. Though a significant portion of the parliament was composed of the so-called 'Democratic Bloc'—led by the Rukh nationalist movement which spearheaded the drive to independence—a larger part still was held by the 'group of 239' socialists of the old school. The massive vote in favour of independence was achieved through a coincidence of the aims of the nationalist movement and the belief by those in power that Ukraine would benefit economically from independence.

Since 1991 the broad consensus in favour of independence has become severely frayed, especially in the Russian-speaking, industrialized eastern part of the country, which has suffered particularly in the wake of the fragmentation of the Soviet economic system. Compounded by a separatist movement in the Crimea, the result has been a sharpening of the regional polarization of the country, with the nationalist, anti-Russian west pitted against the more socialist-minded, pro-Russian east. In a desperate attempt to prevent the growing tensions between west and east breaking the country apart, Kravchuk spent his presidency appeasing both sides. The political

consequence of this protracted balancing act was a paralysis of political will and a pace of political and economic reform which has been painfully slow. Coming at a time when 40 per cent of state industry is at a standstill, the parliamentary and presidential elections were seen by many as a referendum on Ukraine's future as a state.

The Electoral System

The Soviet majoritarian electoral system has been left largely in tact in Ukraine, and what revisions have been made have not been conducive to encouraging multi-party democracy. A unicameral legislature of 450 deputies is elected from single-member constituencies in what, with competitive elections, is a double-ballot system. For a candidate to be elected, two criteria must be met: turnout in the constituency concerned must be over 50 per cent, and the candidate must obtain more than 50 per cent of the vote. If, as a result of the first ballot, no candidate is elected, a runoff is held between the two top-ranking candidates. If no candidate is elected in the runoff, the entire electoral process is begun anew with a new slate of candidates. In a close race, the latter occurrence is a real possibility, given the widespread practice of voting against all the candidates on the ballot as a form of protest.

The current version of the electoral law for parliamentary elections was adopted 18 November 1993 after an acrimonious debate in which national democrat and centrist parties advocated a proportional or mixed system, but the ex-socialist establishment favoured maintaining the existing electoral apparatus. The resultant law has been criticised for being designed to weaken further the country's fledgling political parties, encourage clientelist politics, and preserve the status quo. Under the law the nomination of candidates by political parties is significantly more difficult than that by workers' collectives or informal groups of voters. For this reason, many candidates who are active in political organisations chose to run as independents.

In July 1991 the Ukrainian parliament voted to institute a directly elected president, to be elected for five years by a similar double ballot system, but with the provision that the winning candidate must obtain only a plurality in the second round. A presidential nominee need not be supported by a political party, but must gather 100,000 signatures to be declared a candidate.

The Parliamentary Elections

Throughout 1992 and 1993 there were demands from both left and right for elections to be held ahead of the parliament's term in March 1995. Popular dissatisfaction with the Soviet-era assembly was high. Prompted by the threat of a general strike in September 1993, the parliament reluctantly agreed to call for its own re-election in March 1994, to be followed in June by an early election for the presidency. The re-legalization of the Communist Party soon thereafter heralded the return of a political force which had significant organisational potential and a ready base of support among a disaffected electorate, especially in the east.

At the start of the parliamentary election campaign in the winter of 1994, three features of the political landscape stood out: the geographical polarization of the country, the lack of party affiliation of many of the candidates, and the paucity of sitting deputies who stood for re-election. Of 5,833 registered candidates, 1,557 (26.7 per cent) were nominated by worker's collectives, 3,633 (62.3 per cent) by groups of voters, and a mere 643 (11.0 per cent) by 28 political parties. Only 150

of the 450 sitting deputies stood for re-election (of these 57 were successful), and the average of nearly 13 candidates per constituency meant that it was often difficult for voters to choose. This encouraged them to opt for familiar names, which were often those of people already in power at some level.

Two axes of competition dominated the run-up to the elections: economic policy and foreign policy, with the focus in the latter case on ties with Russia. The four electoral blocs prominent in the campaign can be distinguished according to their stand on these issues. The national democratic right, strongest in the west of the country and in Kiev, favoured economic reforms, but their top priority was building a strong independent state.¹ Reform-minded centrists, on the other hand, were mostly willing to sacrifice a degree of Ukrainian sovereignty for the sake of improving the economy through stronger economic ties with Russia. A number of such candidates united for the electoral campaign in the Inter-Regional Bloc for Reforms (IRBR), based on a coalition of local business organisations, and led by future president Leonid Kuchma. This bloc was strongest in the east and south, as was the leftist block, composed of Socialist, Communist and Peasant parties, which favoured gradual and limited economic reforms, ideally in the framework of a reconstructed version of the Soviet Union. The final electoral force is what is known as the 'Party of Power': that segment of the old nomenclatura which supported Kravchuk's drive for independence in 1990 and 1991. These former national communists are largely depoliticised, but intent on defending their political power bases, most of which are organised around local patronage networks.

Opinion polls showed that the economy was by far the most important issue for most voters (Wasylyk, 1994). Though inflation had been under control since early 1994, prices had been kept stable at the expense of the work-force, a significant portion of which had not been paid in several months. The second main focus of concern was Ukraine's foreign policy, dominated by its fraught relations with Russia. In addition to the possibility of an economic union with the Russian Federation, prominent issues in this area included the fate of the Black Sea Fleet and of Ukraine's nuclear missiles, and the means of paying for much needed supplies of oil and gas. A related complex of issues involved regional demands for autonomy and secession in Crimea, as well as the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, which held, at the same time as the elections officially unrecognised but widely supported referendums on their status.

Pre-election polls showed support for political parties growing as the election drew closer, with the IRBR and centrist parties gaining significant ground in the east over the course of the campaign, and national-democratic parties bolstering their strength in their traditional strongholds of Kiev and the west. The socialist-communist bloc held steady in the polls in third place.²

The IRBR's poor showing in the elections and the virtual clean sweep by Socialists and Communists in the east thus came as something of a surprise. This result can be partly attributed to the tendency of the majoritarian electoral system to favour those parties best organised, but also to the fact that pre-election polls had been mainly conducted in the cities, whereas the leftist parties proved strongest in rural areas of the east and the centre. In the event, the first round of the elections, held on 27-28 March, elected only 49 deputies, though turnout was higher than expected, at 74.8 per cent.³ President Kravchuk's predictions that low turnout would invalidate many electoral contests and that the elections would thus fail to produce the minimum of 301 deputies necessary to make the new parliament quorate

evidently motivated voters to go to the polls. Among those elected on the first round were 25 officially recognised representatives of political parties, including 16 from the left, and 9 from the nationalist right. Most of those elected represent western and eastern constituencies, where political consensus is strongest.

The second rounds of elections, held on 2, 3, 9 and 10 April, succeeded in filling a further 287 seats, such that by mid-April 338, or three quarters, of the parliament's 450 deputies had been elected. Turnout was again relatively high in the April contests, with a national average of 66.9 per cent.

As a result of the first two rounds, a total of 168 deputies were elected from 14 political parties, as well as 170 formal independents, though in fact many of the latter have strong political leanings. The largest bloc in the new parliament is the leftist group of 120 deputies. Those nationalists and centrists officially allied with parties or blocs together gained only 56 seats (with a further 12 in the west going to the far right parties), yet their support in the new parliament is stronger than these figures would suggest. Accounts differ as to the precise amount of support each group enjoys among the 170 independents elected (and even as to the primary affiliation of some of the deputies supported by political parties and blocs).

The leftist bloc is roughly balanced by those deputies on the centre and the right, but the lack of consensus among the anti-leftist forces will most likely prevent them from working together in parliament as a concerted force. The major obstacle to cooperation is the question of relations with Russia, which divides the country politically as well as geographically. As had been expected, leftists were mainly elected from the east, and, with the exception of the Donbas region, predominantly from rural constituencies (Arel and Wilson, 1994). The national democratic deputies were primarily elected from the west, though five national democrats were also elected from central regions, and six members of Rukh from Kiev. The far right gained all of its 12 seats in the west, though several of its candidates made it as far as the runoffs in Kiev. The Inter-Regional Bloc for Reforms has a scattering of seats in the urban east and south.

Reports of irregularities by international observers and the Elections 94 monitoring service in Kiev were manifold (*Washington Post* 12 April 1994, *New York Times* 13 April 1994, *Financial Times* 13 April 1994), including charges of coercion, mis-counting, the distribution of multiple ballots, and abuse of power by the local electoral commissions and government officials. Several hundred complaints were filed with the Central Electoral Commission over the course of the electoral process, but it was alleged that the Commission took action on only those cases publicised by prominent opposition figures.⁴ It is impossible to determine the extent to which corruption influenced the result of the contests, but democrats can take solace in the fact that reports of systematic violations in the June presidential election were rare.

A total of 112 parliamentary seats remain to be filled. In four-fifths of the cases, the failure of the first set of elections to elect a deputy was due to the fact that neither candidate managed to clear the 50 per cent hurdle necessary for election; in the remaining cases, low turnout was the culprit (Arel and Wilson, 1994). Though the electoral law calls for repeat elections to be held within one month of the runoffs, they were postponed by the Central Electoral Commission until 24 July. The electoral process continued for some time still, as there was low turnout in the July elections due to voter fatigue and the holiday season. By November 1994, some 40 seats were still unfilled.

The Presidential Election

It is fair to say that the presidential election of 1991 was a single-issue vote on the fate of Ukraine as a nation-state. That this same issue should again dominate Ukraine's second contest for the presidency is testimony to the difficulties the newly-independent country has met in attempting to build the institutions of a democratic state. In December 1991, Leonid Kravchuk succeeded in identifying himself with the drive for independence, but he was at the same time the choice of the conservatives in the country who saw him as representing a link with the communist past. If in his first race Kravchuk had no one to his left, two and a half years later he faced a diametrically opposed situation, with no candidate to his right, and a support base which was the political and geographical mirror image of that which propelled him to the presidency in 1991.

Rightly sceptical of his prospects, Kravchuk attempted to delay the election until such time as the powers of the supreme executive had been better defined. But the newly-elected parliament refused to grant him his wish, and eventually Kravchuk assented to the elections when opinion polls showed him taking the lead in popular support. Over the course of the campaign the new left-dominated parliament flexed its muscles by electing as its Chairman the leader of the Socialist party and presidential candidate Oleksandr Moroz, and a month later reinstating the communist-era prime minister Vitalyi Masol, who had been removed from his post amid student hunger strikes in October 1990.

With the left on the rise, the situation was dismal for the nationalist right. Despairing of their chances of gaining the presidency (their leader, Viacheslav Chornovil had garnered only 23 per cent of the vote in the heyday of nationalist sentiment in 1991), they grudgingly agreed to support Kravchuk's candidacy as the lesser of evils. Though closer in their economic vision to Kuchma and the centrists, the right's main goal continued to be the preservation of a conception of the status of their country which only Kravchuk appeared to share. On the economic front, Kravchuk could boast that he had managed to reign in inflation and was drawing up plans for further reforms, yet with an estimated 85 per cent of the population living below the poverty level in 1993 (Solchanyk, 1994), his promises rang hollow in many ears.

Given the virtual eclipse of the right, Kuchma's loose association of centrists appeared to be the only group which was prepared to push for radical change in the face of the two by now discredited ideologies of socialism and what he termed 'economic nationalism'. A Russian-speaking representative of the military-industrial complex and former head of world's largest missile factory, Kuchma presented himself as a pragmatic and experienced technocrat possessed of the skills necessary to lead Ukraine out of the clutches of the corrupt ex-communist establishment and on the road to economic recovery. His emphasis on the need to form closer economic ties with Russia was thus couched in terms of the necessity of saving the Ukrainian economy in order to save the state.

But his rejection in his campaign speeches of the IMF formula for reform, on the grounds that widespread unemployment was an impermissible cost for the country to bear, and his repeated promises to rebuild the welfare net of the socialist system hark back to his stint as Prime Minister from October 1992 to September 1993 when, though given extraordinary powers by parliament, he did little to curb unemployment or to promote privatization. As a presidential candidate he promised to preserve the military-industrial complex from whence he came. Kuchma thus

played to popular anger against the current administration, without giving a clear indication of where his priorities lay, aside from forging closer links with Russia.

In addition to Kravchuk and Kuchma, five other candidates gathered the requisite number of signatures to have their names put on the ballot. These included, at one end of the spectrum, the socialist Chairman of the new parliament, Oleksandr Moroz (the only candidate affiliated with a political party) and at the other end Volodymyr Lanovyi, a young economist who served in the 1990–1992 Fokin government. In between were three minor candidates: Ivan Pliushch, Chairman of last parliament and close to Kravchuk in his political positions, the ethnic Russian Valerii Babych who claimed to be uniquely qualified to implement reforms on the basis of his practical experience as a businessman, and finally, Minister of Education Petro Talanchuk, old in years and a member of the old guard, who had little support and was virtually ignored by the press. It was clear by May that the contest would come down to Kuchma and Kravchuk. During the weeks prior to the election, these two candidates rose steadily in the polls, with the latter slowly gaining on his main rival. Despite their success in the parliamentary elections, the socialist's candidate Moroz trailed even in the east.⁵

In contrast to the previous contest, the predictions of the pollsters were corroborated in the first round of the presidential election on 26 June, in which Kravchuk took 37.7 per cent of the vote to Kuchma's 31.3 per cent, while Moroz scored a mere 13.0 per cent, not significantly more than the 9.3 per cent obtained by the young Lanovyi. Babych, Pliushch, and Talanchuk trailed with 2.4, 1.3, and 0.5 per cent of the vote respectively.

It is noteworthy that support for Kuchma was not concentrated in the same regions which elected members of his Inter-Regional Block for Reforms to parliament, but was highest in those regions which border on Russia (Luhansk, Donetsk, Sumy), as well as Crimea and Odessa, which have strong historic links with that country. Though polling less than 20 per cent in Crimea and the Donbas regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, Kravchuk swept the west and the centre of the country, with nearly 90 per cent of the vote in the three western regions comprising Galicia. In the Donbas, a strong showing for Moroz edged Kravchuk into third place, while in several regions of the centre and the northwest he came second, but nowhere did he obtain more than a quarter of the vote. Lanovyi's support was erratically distributed; the city of Kiev was the only region in which he managed to finish in second place.

Despite Kravchuk's apparent success, a poll shortly after the first round revealed that much of his support was shallow: approximately half of those respondents who had voted for him in the cities of Kiev, Kharkiv, and L'viv had done so because 'there was no better candidate', whereas only a third of Kuchma's supporters gave this reason (*Post-Postup*, 7–13 July 1994). Though Moroz refrained from advising his supporters as to how to cast their votes in the second round, the Communist Party gave a signal to leftist voters by announcing that it would not support Kravchuk. In theory Moroz was closer in his policies to the then president, but ironically, Kuchma appealed to those who expressed the least desire for economic reform. The fact that these were the same voters who were least favourably disposed to Ukrainian independence suggests that, in the minds of the voters, the two issue dimensions which dominated the electoral campaign were but one.⁶ This was perhaps less a misperception of Kuchma's position on the part of the most disillusioned segment of the electorate as a scepticism with regard to the capacity of Ukraine's leadership to solve its country's problems unaided.

Evidently securing a considerable portion of the first-round support for Moroz, Kuchma's won in the second round on 10 July with 52.1 per cent of the vote, as against Kravchuk's 45.5 per cent. At 71.7 per cent, turnout was higher still than in the first round (70.4 per cent). The unexpectedly large numbers who turned out to vote in Odessa and the Crimea undoubtedly helped Kuchma to achieve his aim, as did the Group of Seven's promise on the eve of the election to grant \$4 billion worth of aid to Ukraine if it undertook genuine reform. The regional distribution of the vote was even more marked in the second round than in the first, with Kuchma receiving the support of less than four per cent of the electors of the western region of L'viv, but close to 90 per cent in the Donbas and the Crimea.

At a time of severe crisis and a loss of faith in the viability of economic independence, elections to Ukraine's highest legislative and executive offices provoked an outburst of popular anger whose primary focus was the current office-holders. This anger permitted the return of a strong contingent of ex-communists to parliament and brought to power a president who was perceived as standing for change. For a significant portion of the electorate, faith in an independent state as the guarantor of the well-being of Ukraine and nation-building as a priority are on the wane. But this does not mean that there is a strong consensus as to the practical steps the new leadership should take to improve the lot of its people. With a president committed to implementing radical economic reforms and a parliament more conservative than the previous one, Ukraine is likely to be the scene of increasing conflict. Whether a renewal of economic ties with Russia will heal the economy remains to be seen, but an undoubted consequence of such a move will be an exacerbation of the regional polarisation which the 1994 elections so graphically brought to the fore.

Notes

1. Extreme nationalist groupings such as the UNA-UNSO, the Ukrainian Conservative Republican Party, and the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists are also strongest in these areas.
2. Polls by SOCIS-Gallup, the Kiev International Institute of Sociology together with the Kiev Mohyla Academy, the Democratic Initiatives Research and Education Center 1993, and other organisations (see *Holos Ukrainy* 12 and 15 March 1994, Wasylyk *op. cit.*, 48, and 'Ukrainian Public Opinion of the Eve of Elections to a New Parliament', Democratic Initiatives Research and Education Center, Kiev, November 1993).
3. Turnout was higher in the west than in the more populous east, lower in Kiev (56%) and surprisingly high in Crimea (60.8%), given that Crimean President Meshkov had called for a boycott.
4. For a list of violations by constituency, see *Verkhovna Rada Elections in Ukraine: March 27 to April 10, 1994*, Part I, Democratic Elections in Ukraine Observation and Coordinations Center, Kiev, 1994.
5. Polls conducted by the International Institute of Sociology and the Kiev Mohyla Academy.
6. Survey conducted by the Academic-Practical Centre for Political Psychology (*Holos Ukrainy* 25 June, 1994).

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