Ukraine's Rada "Snap Elections" – A Battle of the Billionaires that Has Split Ukraine

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Before the October 26, 2014 snap or, as they say in Ukrainian, "special" parliamentary elections in Ukraine, President Petro Poroshenko did his best to present the Minsk Protocols, a truce or ceasefire agreement, signed a month and a half earlier, on September 5, and the subsequent peace plans discussed in the Belarusian capital of Minsk as a victory for his government against the forces of Novorossiya in East Ukraine's self-declared Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic. In actuality, the situation in Ukraine was much different. Kiev had been militarily defeated in East Ukraine and could no longer continue with the war.

Before the Rada snap elections, President Poroshenko, who was elected a few months earlier on May 25, was trying to display a show of strength to Ukrainians. Poroshenko was merely putting on a show for domestic consumption, specifically for the nationalist voters and minority of aggressive hardliners who wanted to continue the fighting in East Ukraine. Petro Poroshenko's hawkish bravado and theatrics was intended for selling the ceasefire with the breakaway oblasts of Donetsk and Lugansk to the nationalist hardliners in Ukraine and to hide his government's defeat.

Poroshenko went so far as to even revamp his government with a militarized and hawkish image. To promote this pro-war image, President Poroshenko intentionally selected the cluster-bomb using Stepan Poltorak, the head of the Ukrainian National Guard leading the charge in East Ukraine, to replace Valeriy Heletey—who falsely claimed that Russia had invaded Ukraine to conceal the defeat in East Ukraine—as Kiev's new defence minister on October 12, 2014. Poroshenko's public appearances in military clothing and visits to Ukrainian troops have been part of this too.

Militarization and the Evolution of a Police State

The situation in Kiev is tense and internal tensions are increasing. While East Ukraine has its own military, there are warlords, unrestrained oligarchs, and uncontrollable militias in other parts of the country. Protests have continued throughout Ukraine. The Eastern European country's problems just continue to grow and multiply. Many of the protests and clashes have nothing to do with the fighting with East Ukraine, but economic stagnation, mismanagement, corruption, and the country's oligarchs.

Even after the fighting in East Ukraine was suspended, the Ukrainian government refused to demobilize the Ukrainian National Guard and to send home the draftees that have served their terms and finished their tours. The reasons are that these draftees are being kept for internal policing and because of Poroshenko's fears that the private armies of other Ukrainian oligarchs may be used to overthrow him or that he could be ousted by unhappy groups. The tensions over demobilization increased so much that about two weeks before the elections, on October 13, draftees in the National Guard were protesting in Kiev asking to be demobilized.

The vestiges of a police state have been put together in post-EuroMaidan Ukraine in the name of fighting corruption and terrorism. In parallel to the war on Donbas that Kiev calls a "anti-terrorism" operation, political witch hunts have taken place and laws have been passed that allow for the seizing of homes, bank accounts, and assets. Ukrainian citizens can be declared enemies of the state for their views and comments on the internet.

Even the Russian Orthodox Church of Ukraine has been under pressure and attack. The ultra-nationalists and the government in Kiev are trying to force the Orthodox Church and its leaders to renounce Patriarch Kirill I in Moscow and declare allegiance to the unrecognized and excommunicated Patriarch Filaret in Kiev. Several priests loyal to Patriarch Filaret were even forcibly imposed onto several Orthodox Churches before the snap election.

Low Voter Turnout

In terms of votes, the People's Front, the party that Prime Minister Yatsenyuk and Rada Speaker Oleksandr Turchynov jointly founded after the EuroMaidan coup, got first place with

3,454,358 ballots. They earned 22.17% of the participating votes. Using the preliminary results, this means that 10.57% of Ukraine's 36,514,491 registered voters supported the People's Front.

Yatsenyuk's camp was about neck to neck with President Poroshenko's own political camp the Blok Petro Poroshenko or the Petro Poroshenko Bloc. The difference between both competing frontrunners was a mere 0.36% of the total votes cast, but the mixed electoral system — which awards half the Rada seats on the basis of first-past-the-post voting and the other half of the Rada seats through proportional representation — resulted in the Blok Poroshenko getting 132 seats while the People's Front got 82 Rada seats. Blok Poroshenko won the snap elections, in other words.

Although it did not get the high results that it expected, Blok Poroshenko got 3,398,588 ballots cast for it, which earned it 21.81% of the total votes cast. Using the preliminary results, this means that Blok Poroshenko earned the support of 9.3% of registered voters. Despite the low support, Poroshenko and his political allies gained control of just over 30% of the Rada's parliamentary deputies. This means that Poroshenko has failed to concentrate power and will not have the strong presidency that he wants. He will have to compromise with Prime Minister, Yatsenyuk, Rada Speaker Oleksandr Turchynov, and other groups.

Samopomoshch (Self-Reliance) got third place in the snap elections with 1,713,489 votes, giving Self-Reliance a share of 11.00% of the total vote. The Opposition Bloc, which has unified some of the smaller forces opposing EuroMaidan, got fourth place with 1,460,960 votes, giving it a 9.37% share of the total vote. The violent ultra-nationalist Oleh Lyashko's Radical Party got fifth place with 1,159,945 votes and a share of 7.44% of the total, followed by Yulia Tymoshenko's Batkivshchyna (Fatherland), Oleh Tyahnybok's neo-Nazi Svoboda, and the Communist Party. Tymoshenko got 885,714 votes and a share of 5.68% of the total, Svoboda got 735,401 votes and a share of 4.72%, and the Communists got 602,341 votes and a share of 3.86% of the total.

The government in Kiev and the Ukrainian mainstream media blatantly lied. According to them the turnout, including in East Ukraine, for the 2014 parliamentary elections were 99.9%. In reality, there has been huge media censorship and the diversity of media outlets progressively reduced since EuroMaidan. The electoral turnout in the 2014 Rada elections was the lowest ever in Ukraine's history and significantly lower than the 67.05% average voter turnout of all the previous Rada elections.

The Electoral Geography of Division

The turnout for the Rada elections was highest in the northwestern oblasts of Ukraine and progressively declined the further southwest the elections were held. This is why Lviv, Ternopil, Volyn, and Ivano-Frankivsk respectively had turnouts of 70%, 68.28%, 64.85%, and 63.73% — the highest level of voter participation — and Lugansk, Donetsk, Odessa, and Kherson respectively had turnouts of 32.87%, 32.4%, 39.52%, and 41.36% — the lowest level of voter participation — on October 26. With the acceptation of Khmelnytsky, with a turnout of 60.21%, all the other Ukrainian oblasts and the city of Kiev had voter participation levels ranging in the fifties and forties with a progressive drop the further southeast the elections were held.

The People's Front performed the best in the oblasts of Cherkasy, Chernivtsi, Ivano-

Frankivsk or Prykarpattia (formerly Stanislav), Kiev (which excludes the capital city of Kiev), Kirovohrad (Kirovograd), Khmelnytsky, Lviv, Rivne, Ternopil, Volyn, and Zhytomyr in the central and western regions of Ukraine. This is the preliminary breakdown of the People's Front's vote shares from the places where it got the most votes: 26.71% in Cherkasy; 32.33% in Chernivtsi; 37.53% in Ivano-Frankivsk; 28.32% in Kiev or Kyivshchyna; 23.66% in Kirovohrad; 26.09% in Khmelnytsky; 32.99% in Lviv; 29.32% in Rivne; 36.49% in Ternopil; 33.26% in Volyn; and 26.4% in Zhytomyr. It received no votes in Lugansk and only got 6.09% of the votes in Donetsk from the 32.4% of registered voters that participated in the snap elections.

The Blok Poroshenko had the best electoral performance in the following regions: the self-governing city of Kiev and the oblasts of Chernihiv (Chernigov), Poltava, Sumy, and Vinnytsia in the northwest and central part of Ukraine; the oblasts of Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odessa in the southwest; and the oblast of Zakarpattia (Transcarpathia), on the Ukrainian border with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, in the westernmost part of Ukraine. Like Yatsenyuk's People's Front, Blok Poroshenko did poorly in Donetsk, Lugansk, and Kharkiv. It received the highest share of votes in Vinnytsia, on the border with Moldova, where it got 37.48% of the votes from the 58.08% of registered Ukrainians voters that participated.

The Opposition Bloc won all the seats from Kharkiv and Lugansk. In Zaporizhzhya it won eight out of nine constituencies. It also had the overall second best performance in the southwestern area of Ukraine.

Some inferences can be made from these statistics. The first is that there is a west-east divide in the country. The westernmost parts of Ukraine heavily supported the snap Rada elections while the easternmost parts of the country opposed it.

The second point is that the Opposition Bloc and Ukrainian Communist Party managed to attract registered voters in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine to participate in the election. In the cases of Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Lugansk the participation figures would have been drastically lower if it was not for the participation of the Opposition Bloc and of the Ukrainian Communists.

The most important conclusion, ignoring the intimidation and other negative factors during the campaigning and the election process, is that the 2014 Rada election is not reflective of the political views of the Ukrainian population due to the low level of participation and the system of semi-proportional representation.

An Unfair Electoral Environment

The elections were conducted in an atmosphere of fear and coercion. Candidates have been attacked and assassination attempts have even taken place. Aside from the situation in East Ukraine, this is one of the reasons that the participation was low. Alongside the intimidation and violence, the increasing post-EuroMaidan media controls and censorship also prevented a diversity of views from being expressed freely.

The Communist Party was literally decimated before the election. It was effectively disbanded in the Rada while legal action was taken against it to ultimately outlaw it. Communist Party of Ukraine offices and members were consistently attacked too.

Despite the unreasonable circumstances that the snap elections were conducted under, the United States, Canada, and the European Union have put their support behind the process and the results. Instead these countries are calling for a halt to the parallel November 2, 2014 elections in East Ukraine. On October 29, the European Union released a statement condemning the Russian government's plans to recognize the election results in Novorossiya and condemned the November 2 elections in East Ukraine themselves. The office of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, not to be mistaken with the United Nations itself, also followed suit to condemn the November 2 elections.

Will Ukraine Implode?

Since the truce in Minsk was made, it was hoped that the conflict in East Ukraine would become another frozen conflict in the post-Soviet space. Although even with the ceasefire the hostilities never totally stopped, the fighting was reduced and the conflict in East Ukraine began to be compared to the post-Soviet conflicts that Tbilisi has with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the conflict that Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan have over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the conflict between Moldova and the breakaway Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria).

According to Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic, the "party of war" has won the 2014 Rada elections. Days after the snap Rada elections, on October 29, without giving any explanation the authorities in Kiev withdrew from the October 11 delineation agreement that Poroshenko had made with Donetsk for creating a demarcation line to create a demilitarized border under the ceasefire agreement. This may be a sign that the ceasefire is being abandoned by Kiev.

The Ukrainian military has been reorganizing since the truce and could be waiting until the warm weather of spring arrives in 2015 to launch a new offensive in East Ukraine. Since the truce, Kiev has been receiving military aid and training from the US, Poland, and NATO. The media in North America and the European Union have been looking the other way as Polish mercenaries and arms have been flooding eastward into Ukraine while they have been continuously blaming the Russian Federation for intervening in East Ukraine.

The situation is even more complicated, because there is no unity in Kiev. There are many internal rivalries inside Ukraine between competing factions and the oligarchs. The Ukrainian military and more specifically the Ukrainian National Guard are not under the total control of Kiev. There are private armies and militia formations controlled by local oligarchies. This is one of the reasons that the Ukrainian government is militarizing and refusing to demobilize the National Guard draftees.

The day after the Ukrainian National Guard protests, on October 14, there were violent clashes and protests in Kiev because most the Verkhovna Rada's deputies did not support giving the status of Second World War veterans and pensions to the Ukrainian citizens that had collaborated with Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Ukraine in 1941. There was virtually no word about the October 14 clashes from the media networks and outlets in North America and most the European Union. Instead the media in these places would go on to report that the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic were preventing the people of East Ukraine from voting in the October 26 Rada elections. *The Times*, one of Britain's prominent daily newspapers, would even show the picture of a soldier in Kashmir and claim that it was one of Novorossiya's separatist soldiers in East Ukraine preventing the local population from participating in the Rada elections.

Kremlin endorses Ukraine's pro-western vote

Ukraine

Ben Hoyle Moscow

Ukrainians have voted in droves to escape the shadow of Russian influence, with preliminary election results indicating that the new parliament will be by far the most pro-western in the country's history.

With more than half of the votes counted, President Poroshenko's party was on course yesterday to take about 130 of the 450 seats available in the Verkhovna Rada, while the Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk's People's Front was in second place with about 80 seats.

Coalition talks between the two men, who helped to lead the revolution that toppled President Yanukovych in February, were under way last night as they sought to make up the shortfall needed for an outright majority of 226 seats.

A third pro-western party led by Andriy Sadovy, the mayor of Lviv, the biggest city in the historically pro-European west, was expected to secure about 34 seats under a voting system in which half of the parliament is filled from party lists under proportional representation and half via first-past-the-post elections in constituencies.

US President Obama hailed "another important milestone in Ukraine's democratic development" and José Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, saluted a "victory

A house hit by shelling in east Ukraine, where turnout was much lower
VASILY FEDOSENKO/REUTERS

More than five million people could not vote as they were in territories held by pro-Russian separatists
MUKHTAR KHAN/AP

of democracy" and a pro-European agenda, but the most important validation came from Moscow.

Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, said the elections seem to be "complete", but "not throughout the entire territory of Ukraine". He expected the Russian government to "recognise these elections, because it's

important for us that a power in Ukraine has finally appeared that will not occupy itself with fighting one another and putting Ukraine into a tug of war between the West and East, but will take on problems that are standing before the country."

Turnout was about 51 per

'It's important that a power in Ukraine has appeared that will not occupy itself with fighting one another'

cent. More than five million of the 36 million voters were unable to vote as they were in Crimea, annexed by Russia in March, or in the territories held by pro-Russian separatists in east Ukraine where more than 3,700 people have been killed in fighting since April. ■

A Kashmiri woman rides a scooter as she crosses a barbed wire at a temporary check point during a strike in Srinagar, India, Monday, Oct. 27, 2014. Separatists groups in Kashmir called a general strike Monday to mark the anniversary of the day Indian troops took control of the region in 1947. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

The Ukrainian National Guard has evolved into a liability. It is a series of political formations tied to the ultra-nationalist militias of groups like Pravy Sektor that are being managed by

the Ukrainian Interior Ministry. In this regard the National Guard can be compared to Nazi Germany's Schutzstaffel (SS). There are growing differences between the Ukrainian military and the National Guard and Kiev authorities too.

The elections in Ukraine have sealed the Eastern European country's fate and split the country into two. All the cleavages in the Ukraine have been stressed almost to a breaking point. On top of it being used as a geopolitical chessboard by Washington and the European Union against Moscow, Ukraine faces political crisis, intensifying rivalries, austerity measures, and economic meltdown. Under these circumstances, an implosion is bound to happen in Ukraine. Unfortunately for the people of Ukraine, the worst is yet to come.

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