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Ukraine and the EU: where to?

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On 28 October 2012, Ukrainians elected a new parliament in a poll that is widely considered to be yet another sign of a reversal of democracy in one of the EU's most important neighboring countries. While the electoral process was indeed subject to a number of irregularities, the dominant interpretations in Brussels and other EU capital in the EU with regard to these elections are, however, highly misleading. Concentrating on the imprisonment of the former prime minister, Yulia Tymochenko, and indulging in speculations about president Yanukovich's next possible further authoritarianist move led many to focus rather obsessively on power struggles within the Ukrainian elite and on the personalities of certain key actors. This is problematic as it ignores broader societal tendencies.

Notwithstanding the many flaws that accompanied the electoral process, the newly elected parliament does, in fact, represent the plurality of opinions. In line with pre-election expectations and in spite of the loss of two million votes, the Party of Regions (PoR) was able to preserve its parliamentary majority in the Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, due to the support of many so-called "independent" candidates. The elections also confirm the political cleavage between the PoR and the opposition coalition, composed of Tymochenko's Fatherland Party and the Front of Change, led by Arseniy Yatsenyuk. In addition, they brought to the fore a strong, albeit heterogeneous, group of representatives expressing disillusionment with the mainstream political forces in the country. With almost 14% of the national vote, the UDAR party, led by world boxing champion Vitaly Klitchko, presents itself as a moderate and pro-modernization alternative. In contrast, the impressive polling of the Communist Party and the neo-fascist Freedom Party reflect the fact that radical political alternative channel a great deal of social protest against the current state of affairs in Ukraine.

As a result, the Ukrainian parliament, which holds its first session on 17 December, is exceptionally representative as compared to its two neighbors Russia and Belarus, which suffer from a “managed democracy” and authoritarian rule, respectively. Undoubtedly, the conduct of the Ukrainian parliamentary elections feeds the views of those who fear that Ukraine will soon join this obscure club of regimes. And yet, any interpretation of where the country is headed needs to go beyond the mere interpretation of irregularities and potential vote rigging: while Ukraine’s elections confirmed the country’s political system as neither authoritarian nor fully democratic, they certainly highlighted its enormous social complexity.

The wide range of the voters’ allegiances, the diversity of the society, the nature of a Ukraine composed of a rural West and heavily industrialized East, and the lack of integrative, mainstream political projects such as a democratic repositioning towards a Western model of liberal democracy determine the country’s political fabric. This mix of factors is reflected, on the domestic front, in the many diverging views on the type of political system that should be established, the economic model that should be followed and the foreign policy direction that should be pursued. To date, eight years after the Orange Revolution, there is still no clear social consensus on the value of liberal representative democracy, the market economy, and a Euro-Atlantic foreign policy. Any attempt by a political player in Ukraine to break with the currently pursued middle-of-the-road policy of muddling through is bound to trigger social opposition. This complexity is both the country’s strength and weakness. On the one hand, substantial regression towards authoritarian rule will meet considerable societal resistance; on the other, Ukraine’s considerable plurality consolidates its status of being trapped in transition.

In Brussels and other EU capitals, decision-makers look at Ukraine with a mix of frustration and reserve. After the disillusionment with the Orange Revolution, the ongoing imprisonment of Tymochenko, and the faltering political and economic reform process, “Ukraine fatigue” is nowadays discernible in almost all EU institutions. However, this fatigue is by and large self-inflicted, as the EU projected foredoomed expectations

onto the country. Even so, Brussels expects the national political elite to lead the count out of that grey zone lying somewhere between a former post-Soviet model of authoritarian rule and a liberal democracy.

Arguably, it is regrettable that Ukrainian voters did not vote for “more Europe” and more democracy. But these elections were not about this choice. The preferences of the Ukrainian electorate, exposed to rising political alienation and social apathy, were determined more by everyday concerns and the creeping economic crisis than this alleged dichotomy. As if this is not enough, the political indifference and even cynicism of many voters is also the result of the post-ideological nature of party-like movements created around leaders fostering influential, wide-ranging and fluctuating patronage networks.

If the EU wants to overcome this highly personalized power game in Ukraine and avoid further radicalization of the political landscape, it should bring this diverse and antagonized society into its policy. European recognition of Ukraine’s societal complexity requires a tailored approach that takes the country as a whole into account and not just its political elite. Showing that society is an essential element of the EU’s approach means going beyond the exclusionary and limited policies of visa liberalization and just handful of occasional exchanges with a few privileged civil society actors.

If the EU is able to demonstrate to Ukrainian society that the (currently stopped) association process and the envisaged Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement are beneficial to all factions of society, in the short term too, it is quite likely that even Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the Eastern part of the country will reconsider their negative attitude towards the EU. Apart from the EU’s readiness to engage in such process, this also requires Brussels to engage with its critics in Ukraine and acknowledge that the EU’s supposedly transformative power is about transforming the relations between state and society for the benefit of the latter, and not just the political and economic elite.

However, if the EU continues with past practices, then Europeanization and the Europe perspective will remain an intangible and, in fact, empty promise for the majority of

Ukrainians and the country will equally remain subject to political manipulation in domestic power disputes. The EU should not wait for some oligarchic clans to see their selfish interests materialize as a consequence of Tymochenko's release and the subsequent signing of the EU-Ukraine association agreement. Instead, Brussels should regard and treat the agreement as an integrative and inclusionary tool to help reinvigorate the Ukrainian transformation from the bottom. But for this to happen, it needs to start seeing Ukrainian society as it is. That means that Brussels will have to acknowledge its enormous diversity and stop regarding it as being split between the east and west.

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