

## Regional and municipal elections in Ukraine – a test case

The regional and municipal elections in Ukraine on 25 October 2015 were the first test of the political atmosphere for the post-Maidan coalition government and especially for President Poroshenko and his reform and decentralisation policy. Despite the solid performance of the president's party, the ruling coalition lacks a stable majority at the local level. Prime Minister Yatsenyuk, in particular, was weakened by this election. It is becoming clear that, despite the limited successes of reform parties such as "Self Reliance", established elites have prevailed and the oligarchs have reasserted themselves as the central players in Ukrainian politics.

### The growing importance of regional elections

Due to new electoral legislation and in the context of planned decentralisation, regionally and locally elected representatives will play an increasingly important role in Ukrainian politics. This also has consequences for the central government in Kyiv, which will cede responsibility and resources to regional administrations, municipalities, and mayors. For this reason, it was important for the president that his "Bloc Petro Poroshenko" turned in a good performance. At the same time, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk—and by extension the coalition government—was weakened because he decided that his party would not take part in the election due to poor poll numbers (less than 2% compared to 22% in the 2014 parliamentary elections). In the future, President Poroshenko will likely have to look for a new coalition partner.

It was unusual for an election at this level that the campaigns did not focus on municipal problems, but on issues affecting the entire country, such as the economic crisis, relations with Russia, the Crimean question, and the situation in the Donbass. This reflects the politicisation of the public and the level of emotion associated with the current reform process. As a result of the annexation of Crimea and the war in parts of Eastern Ukraine, there is no longer a party with a pro-Russian platform. According to election law, the 1.5 m internally displaced persons could not participate in the election and no elections were held in 91 municipalities in the Donetsk region and 31 in the region of Luhansk. The election in Mariupol had to be postponed because of problems with the ballots.

### Shortcomings of voting legislation

The International Election Observation Mission of the OSCE / ODIHR, Council of Europe, and European Parliament described the election as well organized, competitive, and respectful of democratic processes.

They criticized, however, the complexity of the new electoral law, the dominance of influential economic groups in the electoral process, and these groups' influence on the media during the election and called for a continuation of the reform process. Since the major media outlets are still owned by economic actors and they were able to invest huge sums in the campaigns, smaller parties had virtually no chance in this election. The 5% hurdle introduced by the major parties before the election exacerbated this trend. The politicisation of the media on the national and regional levels and its instrumentalisation by political and economic interests mean it remains more of an instrument of influence than of the freedom of expression.

The new electoral system has been criticized by election observers for its hasty implementation, its complexity, and its partial non-compliance with standards of the OSCE and Council of Europe. The Civil Network "OPORA" and other NGOs did not observe any systematic electoral fraud. However, irregularities are increasingly coming to light, and it is clear that the massive expenditure of resources means that not all parties and candidates had equal chances of success.

### Old wine in new bottles

The dissolution of the "Party of Regions" and the banning of the "Communist Party" meant that two major players in the 2010 election did not take part in the latest election. Both had represented, in particular, the eastern and southern parts of the country. On the other hand, new party projects were established that demonstrate the growing conflicts between different interest groups.

The "Opposition Bloc", for example, included many former leaders and members of the "Party of Regions". It performed especially well in the southern and eastern parts of the country. This party, however, did not manage to take up the dominant role its predecessor party played in the core regions. In the east and south of the country the election was dominated by parties connected to Petro Poroshenko, Ihor Kolomojsky, and Rinat Akhmetov. An important challenger to the "Opposition Bloc" in these regions was the party "Our Region", a project of President Poroshenko, who wanted to substantiate his claim to power here. The "Rebirth" party, supported by Kolomojsky, obtained an absolute majority both in the region and in the city parliament of its third largest city, Kharkiv. A second important party project supported by Kolomojsky is "UKROP", which was started

with the help of his corporate group "Privat" and close partners such as Hennadij Korban and Boris Filatov and came in 2nd in Kolomojksys home region of Dnipropetrovsk.

**Turnout and results**

At 46.6%, voter turnout in the first round of voting was lower than in the 2014 parliamentary elections (52.4%) and in the last local elections, in 2010 (52%). 34.1% of Ukrainians participated in the second round of voting. Vitalij Klitschko, a key ally of President Poroshenko, was able to win the mayoral elections in Kyiv in the second round. In Kharkiv, the incumbent Hennadij Kernes won the mayoral elections with over 60% of the votes despite a pending court case and an assassination attempt. His Kolomojksy-supported party, "Rebirth", gained an absolute majority in the regional parliament. Candidates supported by the oligarch Kolomojksy also won in the important cities of Dnipropetrovsk and Odesa, giving him control of the country's three largest cities outside of Kyiv. In the Kyiv regional parliament, the president's party won 26% of votes to come in ahead of the "Fatherland" party of Yulia Tymoshenko (19%). In the Dnipropetrovsk region, the "Opposition Bloc" (38%) led "UKROP" (Association of Ukrainian patriots) (21%). With 27% of votes, the "Opposition Block" edged out the "Bloc Petro Poroshenko" (26%) in the region of Odesa, as well.

**Number of Representatives in Regional Parliaments 2015**

Party	Representatives
Bloc Petro Poroshenko	8,821
Fatherland	8,054
Our Region	4,507
Opposition Bloc	4,033
Agricultural Party	3,321
Radical Party	2,498
UKROP	2,247
Rebirth	1,688
Freedom	1,664
Self Reliance	913

Source: Central Election Commission

The results of this election make it clear that the "revolution of dignity" did not lead to a fundamental change of elites. The former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and her "Fatherland" party continue to be key players in Ukrainian politics, as does Ihor Kolomojksy, who was able to expand his influence in Ukrainian politics with his own party projects. Although old networks were broken up with the dissolution of the "Party of Regions", many of the same politicians and oligarchs were active in the redistribution positions and power.

**Conclusions**

Despite criticism of the electoral law and some irregularities, a large majority of Ukrainians were able to vote freely and no party questioned the election's results. Although the results reflected a better performance by the presidential party than had been expected based on polling, they also demonstrated the strengthening of Ihor Kolomojksy as one of the main actors in Ukrainian politics. Kolomojksy's conflict with President Poroshenko could lead him to pursue new elections. The right-wing party "Freedom" was strengthened in the election and the Reform Party "Self Reliance" was able to achieve solid results—including in the east—as a party of the middle class. The "Opposition Bloc" failed to become a central force in Ukrainian politics and absorb pro-Russian voters.

**Author**

Stefan Meister, meister@dgap.org

Dr. Stefan Meister is project director for Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia at the Robert Bosch Center of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP).

Note: This text is the sole responsibility of the author and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the German Advisory Group.

**German Advisory Group**

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**Editors**

Dr. Ricardo Giucci, Robert Kirchner

**Contact**

German Advisory Group  
c/o BE Berlin Economics GmbH  
Schillerstr. 59, D-10627 Berlin  
Tel. +49 30/20 61 34 64 0  
Fax +49 30/20 61 34 64 9  
info@beratergruppe-ukraine.de  
www.beratergruppe-ukraine.de