



Ukraine Political Scene Facing Uncertainty

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Political life in Ukraine has become increasingly active in recent months. This is linked to the start of peace talks and, consequently, to potential presidential and parliamentary elections that could take place in the event of a ceasefire. Future elections are likely to profoundly reshape the Ukrainian political scene, but in the short term they will not change the Western vector of the country's foreign policy.

With no prospect of military success and growing war fatigue, and above all pressure from the U.S., the Ukrainian authorities are preparing the public for negotiations with Russia. The prospect of the cessation of military action and, in the long term, a return to holding elections (they legally cannot be held while martial law is in effect) is leading to a revival of political life and a return to political competition.

Ruling Camp. The ongoing war has deepened the consolidation of power by the president and his office. Successive changes in the government—[the largest occurred last September](#)—not only have further strengthened the presidential administration but also aim to silence criticism and stem the decline in confidence in the ruling camp. It is in the Office of the President (OP) under the leadership of Andriy Yermak where state policy is created and the most important decisions are made, especially those relating to foreign policy. The Cabinet of Ministers with Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal is subordinated *de facto* to the presidential centre and is primarily responsible for the smooth execution of the president's orders. More than half of Ukrainians, however, believe that OP representatives overstep their authority by exerting undue influence over the parliament, government, courts, law enforcement, and anti-corruption institutions.

The president's inner circle also controls, theoretically, the parliament [through the ruling Servant of the People party](#). In practice, although it has the majority, the work discipline and voting turnout of its deputies has been declining in recent months. In addition, the grouping is sharply divided, and some parliamentarians have left it. In the Verkhovna Rada,

there has been an unofficial cross-party "war coalition" since February 2022, which supports major issues relating to defence and European integration. For the most part, it has no problems in obtaining the votes needed to pass the most important decisions for the state, although this means the need for inter-fractional agreements. However, parliament's political position is marginalised and its role is often limited to accepting the decisions of the presidential environment.

President Volodymyr Zelensky enjoys high levels of support, which increased markedly [after his dispute with Donald Trump](#) and now stands at more than 67%. The level of trust in the president is affected by the fact that Ukrainians see the situation as Trump attacking Ukraine as a country, not Zelensky personally. Up to the White House visit, trust in Zelensky had been steadily declining, but was still significantly higher than for other politicians.

Opposition. The opposition parties are fragmented and divided, lacking strong leadership. Despite growing political competition, they support the presidential administration in that elections cannot be held under martial law, and maintain a united front in the face of pressure from, among others, the Trump administration trying to unofficially influence holding elections. The largest of the opposition factions, European Solidarity, has only 27 of the 400 seats in parliament. It is relatively well-rated in opinion polls compared to other factions, but its leader, the former President Petro Poroshenko, does not enjoy the public's trust, although he is most often named as the opposition leader. The ruling majority is trying to limit his influence,

such as by imposing economic sanctions on him for, among other things, violating a ban on transferring assets abroad.

The current parliament includes two factions created from the ruins of pro-Russian parties, dissolved in April 2022: the Opposition Platform—Restoration of Ukraine, and Platform for Life and Peace. Since a pro-Russia attitude is now unacceptable to the Ukrainian public, deputies from these factions, attempting to protect themselves from potential accusations of treason, vote in favour of bills put forward by the presidential environment. These factions are diminishing in importance, and the electorate of the former pro-Russian parties has shrunk sharply, with support mainly from regions now occupied by Russia.

Potential Political Forces in Future Elections. The existing political parties and other state institutions (parliament, government, official apparatus) do not enjoy a positive opinion of Ukrainians; they are not trusted by more than half of the public, so it is highly likely that new political forces will emerge before potential elections. The full-scale war has led to a re-evaluation of Ukrainian society's attitudes to the entities directly involved in defence issues—the army and other uniformed services, as well as volunteer organisations that support the army enjoy the greatest public trust—and it is in them that Ukrainians see future political leaders.

Potential presidential candidates include Zelensky's ousted former commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, who would be the biggest threat to the incumbent head of state in an election, although he has so far expressed no political ambitions. Current polls suggest he would win and enjoys a higher level of public confidence. Kyrylo Budanov, head of the Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR), or Andriy Biletsky, first commander of the Azov battalion, are also identified as potential candidates. From the volunteer community, Serhiy Prytulya, known for his commitment to helping the army (he was, among other things, the initiator of the social fundraising for Bayraktar drones), may also run.

Zelensky and his entourage will try to refresh the presidential party based on the Servant of the People, but limiting themselves to people who have been loyal and proven themselves in politics so far. This will most likely mean changing the name of the party or even creating a new one. The broad influence on current politics and the progressive consolidation of power will make it easier for this force to gain a high position in the elections.

On the other hand, currently functioning parties, such as European Solidarity and Yulia Tymoshenko's *Batkivshchyna*, will lose ground. However, they have the most extensive regional structures, which may mean that they will not

disappear from the political scene. Potential candidates in the presidential elections coming from the current opposition, including Poroshenko and Tymoshenko, are trying to generate electoral capital by, among other things, demonstrating support for collections for the army and criticising some government actions, but they will have to face a very large negative electorate because they are associated with, among other things, being weak on corruption and the oligarchic system.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The ever-closer prospect of a ceasefire in the view of Ukrainians entails a resurgence of political rivalries in Ukraine. Virtually all political forces are unofficially preparing for potential elections, which could lead to internal destabilisation. Individual parties and politicians will focus on winning votes by taking political positions in line with voters' expectations rather than the *raison d'être*. This could translate into problems with decision-making in the parliament, such as the reforms required on the road to European integration and other decisions important to the country's defence. Seeking re-election, Zelensky will try to influence the setting of an election date at a time favourable for him, most likely as soon as possible to capitalise on the relatively high public support. President Trump's administration, which has been critical of Zelensky's possible re-election, may also try to influence the final election decision.

It is possible that presidential, parliamentary, and local elections will be held together. However, this would be technically difficult, regardless of the shape of the peace process and Ukraine's situation after the cessation of military operations. Previous voter registries are largely outdated, affected by the high numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons and the lack of control over parts of the state's territory.

The future political scene may be fragmented, but the direction of European integration will unite most political groupings. The main forces are likely to include Zelensky's grouping, along with his (new) presidential party, and potentially a group associated with the military and volunteers. There is no indication that a significant pro-Russian force will emerge. However, on the basis of the former pro-Russian camp, a new Eurosceptic grouping could grow with a programme aimed at voters disillusioned with the situation in the country and the protracted process of European integration. It is likely that the formation of such a party will be unofficially assisted by Russia, whose goal will be political polarisation and the strengthening of resentment towards the EU, especially since an unambiguously pro-Russian stance is not socially acceptable.