



Ukraine's parliamentary elections could endanger crisis resolution

It's hailed as a clean-slate moment, but unpredictable coalition building may create obstacles to peace prospects

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by [Emma Ashford](#)

Ukrainian voters go to the polls on Sunday to elect members of the Verkhovna Rada — the first such parliamentary elections to be held since this spring's Euromaidan protests. Although the last elections took place only in 2012, a new vote is urgently needed to bring the composition of the Rada more in line with the political environment that has taken hold since the ejection of President Viktor Yanukovich in February. While the vote will provide a fresh start for a parliament plagued with accusations of corruption, the outcome is uncertain, and there are several ways the vote could negatively affect the tentative peace plan between the central government and pro-Russian insurgents in the eastern provinces.

Through elections, President Petro Poroshenko, who can best be described as a pro-Western but pragmatic politician, is seeking a mandate for his handling of the conflict with Russia and for the removal of Yanukovich's cronies from parliament. On Oct. 14, parliament passed [several anti-corruption bills](#), including one that can strip civil servants suspected of corruption of their positions. It is hoped that the elections will reinforce these bills, electing a nominally clean parliament. Though Ukraine has a long history of corruption, such actions are important and may be instrumental in helping Ukraine [obtain additional foreign funds](#) to continue its fight in the Donbass.

However, the primary consequence of the elections may be to shed light on new political actors in Ukraine. Insight into the makeup of the Euromaidan coalition may mean that U.S. and European leaders can no longer ignore some of its less than savory members. At present, the parties associated with Poroshenko are [expected to be the clear winners of the elections](#), taking [30 to 35 percent of the vote](#) (PDF), while other pro-European parties such as former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's Fatherland are expected to take [about 7 percent of the vote](#) (PDF). But it is [unlikely that any party will hold an absolute majority](#), and ongoing disagreements between Poroshenko and Tymoshenko may prevent their factions from forming a government, forcing Poroshenko to look elsewhere for coalition partners.

Other than the expected victory of the Poroshenko bloc, there is a high level of uncertainty about the likely makeup of the Rada, especially since polls were [conducted nationally](#). This is helpful for predicting the results of the 225 parliamentary seats that are assigned to parties on the basis of their share of the overall vote. Unfortunately, it gives us no insight into the likely results in the remaining 225 seats, each of which is decided by the tally in an individual district. These directly elected seats are likely to include smaller parties and various independent candidates. The remnants of Yanukovich's Party of Regions, for instance, are mostly represented by two minor parties (the Opposition Bloc and Strong Ukraine), which are each polling [below 5 percent of the vote](#) (PDF), the cutoff for list-based Rada seats.

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While Russian media outlets have been excessive in their portrayal of all Ukrainian political parties as fascist, there are nonetheless several extreme populist and far-right parties competing in the elections. The far-right party Svoboda, for example, is polling at [about 4 percent](#) (PDF) of the vote and could easily reach the 5 percent cutoff. More worrying is the Radical Party, headed by Oleh Lyashko, a current Rada member and vigilante, which has polled at [7 to 12 percent](#) (PDF) in recent weeks. The party has [links to the far-right](#) neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, and Lyashko has been [involved in abductions](#) in the conflict in the Donbass. Yet if Timoshenko and Poroshenko cannot form a government together, the Radical Party may be a logical choice for coalition building.

The results of such a coalition may be less than palatable for the United States and Ukraine's European allies. Lyashko's motto is "[Glory to Ukraine, death to the occupiers](#)." Along with more than [half of Ukrainians](#), he disagrees with Poroshenko's acceptance of the Minsk peace plan, which calls for pro-Russian groups to disarm and for Russia to withdraw all its troops and military equipment from the border in exchange for increased political autonomy in the Donbass. A government including such extreme parties would be less conciliatory, less likely to make concessions and more likely to consider the use of force. The recent surge in violence in eastern Ukraine, including [the use of cluster bombs](#) by the Ukrainian military, would be more likely to continue, and U.S. and European leaders would be (and should be) less willing to back such a governing alliance.

The elections are likely to be plagued by technical issues that could escalate the crisis. Last week the pro-Russian rebels in Donetsk and Luhansk [rejected](#) both Kiev's offer of self-administration and the imperative to hold parliamentary elections. The rebels instead intend to hold their own elections on Nov. 2. Thus, in a repeat of the presidential election in the spring, the roughly [14 percent](#) of the population that lives in the Donbass — as well as the [5 percent of Ukrainians](#) who live in Crimea — will find themselves disenfranchised. The Rada elections will be observed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which expects that [fewer than 50 percent](#) of polling booths in the disputed regions will report results. The newly elected government will thus have difficulty claiming it represents all of Ukraine.

Ultimately, the success or failure of these elections will lie in how they are interpreted by other states. In the case of Russia, the Kremlin may, somewhat ironically, use the disenfranchisement

of voters in the Donbass to claim that the elections are a sham. If Russia refuses to accept the Rada election results and instead recognizes the results of the rebels' Nov. 2 voting, it will serve to prolong the crisis. And the Rada elections may prove sobering for Ukraine's Western allies, especially if they bring to power a government with far-right or fascist tendencies. In short, while Ukraine's elections are being hailed as an opportunity to wipe the slate clean, they in fact have the potential to create additional obstacles to the peaceful resolution of the Ukraine crisis.

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