

Right-wing oligarchs vie for power in Ukraine elections

Markus Salzmann, Christoph Dreier

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Parliamentary elections take place in Ukraine on Sunday just eight months after the western-backed putsch that ousted former president Viktor Yanukovych. A review of the eight months since February makes clear that, far from ushering in a period of democracy and freedom, the putsch and new western-backed government have plunged the country into war and dictatorship.

Against a backdrop of the war in the east of the country and draconian austerity measures demanded by the IMF and the EU, the country's various oligarchic clans and far right-wing groups are vying for power.

In the last parliamentary elections of 2012, the Party of Regions (PoR) emerged as the strongest party. The PoR based itself heavily on oligarchs in the east of the country and sought to maintain good relations with Russia. When the government of Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign an Association Agreement with the EU late last year, the governments in Washington and Berlin organized a coup based on fascist forces and brought a pro-Western government to power.

Since then the Ukrainian army, in alliance with fascist militias, have fought pro-Russian separatists, terrorizing the population in eastern Ukraine in the process. A few days ago Human Rights Watch revealed that Ukrainian forces had used outlawed cluster munitions in their military offensive.

The war in the east has been accompanied by repressive measures throughout the country that make the election on Sunday a farce. Representatives of PoR and the Moscow-oriented Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) are regularly assaulted and prevented from doing their work. The repression is aimed at intimidating anyone who criticizes the war conducted by the Kiev regime.

The PoR has called the elections illegitimate and has

refused to participate. A ban on the CPU is being prepared, and the party is already prohibited from conducting open political activity in some regions. Its offices in Kiev were set on fire after the February coup.

Other candidates in Sunday's election include members of "Strong Ukraine," led by the billionaire and former vice president, Serhiy Tihipko. Strong Ukraine was formerly in coalition with Yanukovych. Also participating on Sunday is the opposition bloc of former PoR deputies. According to polls, both parties have up to eight percent of the electorate's support. These two organizations with links to Moscow can no longer rely on support from their previous strongholds in the east, now controlled by separatists who refuse to participate in the elections.

Some of the PoR deputies have joined the party of the reigning president and oligarch, Petro Poroshenko, whose bloc is estimated to have the best chance of winning the elections on Sunday. Poroshenko has taken a hard line against the separatists in the east of the country and is directly responsible for the terror campaign against the civilian population.

Poroshenko is supported by Germany and the US and is seeking a close alliance with the EU. At the same time, against the background of military setbacks in the east, a desolate economic situation and gas shortages, Poroshenko has tried to open up channels of communication to Moscow.

One part of Poroshenko's bloc is the UDAR party, headed by the German-Ukrainian boxing champion Vitali Klitschko. Poroshenko's election list also includes many representatives of the western-financed Maidan opposition.

According to polls, the likely second-placed faction could be the ultra-right Radical Party led by Oleh Ljaschko. Ljaschko began his rise to prominence as one

of the extreme right-wing figures in the Maidan Square protests. In the spring he participated in founding the volunteer battalion Azov, which mainly consists of supporters of the neo-Nazi Social National Association.

The media have also played a role in promoting Ljaschko. The Radical Party leader features frequently on the Inter TV channel, owned by the oligarch Dmytro Firtash. Firtash made his fortune in the gas trade between Russia and in the chemical industry. He was closely associated with Yanukovych and after the coup fled to Austria, where he was arrested at the request of the United States. He had previously pledged his support to Poroshenko, but is now providing financial support to Ljaschko.

Ljaschko has conducted a vicious anti-Russian campaign in recent months. He toured the country and was personally involved in the kidnapping and torturing of supporters of the separatists. He has thereby been able to gain many votes from the extreme right.

The two fascist formations, Svoboda and Right Sector, are estimated to have barely any prospect of entering parliament. They played a central role in the February coup and accepted ministerial posts in the subsequent government. In the presidential election in May, however, the Svoboda candidate gained just 1.2 percent of the vote, with the candidate of Right Sector trailing behind at 0.7 percent.

The Fatherland Party of Yulia Tymoshenko has lost considerable support. The oligarch from Dnepropetrovsk, who was one of the main players in the Orange Revolution of 2004-2005, has conducted an extremely nationalist campaign. She has declared that any negotiations with Russia amount to a capitulation. She is demanding a rapid military intervention in the Crimea and that Ukraine join NATO. The head of the Fatherland Party is Nadja Savchenko, a military pilot who is imprisoned in Russia.

Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Interior Minister Arsen Avakov and the Speaker of Parliament Olexandr Turchynov, who were all formerly members of the Fatherland Party, have ditched the party and launched their Popular Front Party. Like the Fatherland Party, they advance extreme right-wing positions. The party is expected to win about six percent of the vote.

Many Maidan protest leaders with direct connections to the west also feature on the electoral lists of the

Popular Front and the Fatherland Party. In addition, they enjoy the support of the third-richest oligarch in the country, Igor Kolomoyskyi.

Kolomoyskyi belongs to the clan associated with the Dnepropetrovsk region and strongly backed the coup in February. He also supported the Orange Revolution and its leader Tymoshenko. He is hoping, above all, to weaken one of his major competitors, Rinat Akhmetov.

Akhmetov, whose fortune was recently estimated by Forbes at over \$12 billion, is the richest Ukrainian oligarch. He was the main financier of Yanukovych but withdrew his support early this year. Akhmetov is critical of the war against the separatists, which he sees as a threat to his business interests in the region. At the same time, he has expressed his opposition to the aims of the separatists.

Kolomoyskyi now hopes to emerge as the richest oligarch. He supports the demand to expropriate the factories of all those oligarchs who back the separatists. In fact, he wants to annex the factories into his own empire in time-honored oligarchic fashion.

After the February coup, Kolomoyskyi was appointed governor of Dnepropetrovsk. In this capacity, he funded his own private battalion, Dnipro, which is responsible for major human rights abuses in the east of the country. There are also suspicions that factories belonging to Akhmetov were destroyed in the military campaign against the separatists.

Despite their differences, all of the parties support continued attacks on the democratic and social rights of the population—attacks that are already underway.

At stake in the election is basically which oligarch clan can emerge on top and profit most. Any criticism of Kiev's war policy in eastern Ukraine and the austerity measures of the IMF and the EU is being brutally suppressed.



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