

2001 Political sketches: too early for summing up

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In fact, it is hardly possible to sum up events that are still in process. This refers to a long list of events that occurred in 2001 – primarily given the forthcoming key political event of 2002, the parliamentary elections. Naturally, the forthcoming elections determined the hidden and open political battles between various political forces and financial-industrial groups.

The Ukrainian politics stopped being a lottery, and nobody expects political improvisation. Potential and actual rivals fight for their election “strongholds” and accumulate force for the final race. In 2001 the “battles” were fought in the best traditions of political survival tactics: some sought to keep their positions, others wanted to stay in politics, still others planned political expansion and attacks on their competitors. The competition occurred at all levels – from businesses to the national government, from parliament to individual regions. Even such a specific “political” area as football was not beyond politics, let alone education, health care, trade unions, etc.

The purpose and the prize of the competition was access to the notorious “administrative resource” - levers of influence and possibility to use various, primarily state-owned, resources. The administrative resource is believed to allow to “make” the election results well before the polling day. The tension of the process can be accounted for by the fact that within the recent four years the number of potential claimants of the “administrative resource” has grown substantially.

Struggle for votes did not show originality. Parties and blocks engaged in a variety of public activism - from giving away food packages in rural areas to sponsoring show business stars and paying for TV shows. Here we do not discuss how relevant such activities are for a standard role a political party plays in a democracy. The effectiveness of that kind of activism can be illustrated by results of a recent opinion poll conducted by the Ukrainian Institute of Social Research and the Social Monitoring Center in December 2001: 60% of the respondents noticed no activity of political parties at all, while 26% saw “some” activity and 5% noticed high level of political activity of parties and blocks.

In 2001, the parliament and the president spent a lot of time on determining new rules of the election race. The “stumbling block” was the election law, and finally President Kuchma won that round of the game. Advocates of the proportional system failed to have their version of the law, and also failed to convince the president to accept the compromise: 25% of MPs to be elected in majoritarian constituencies, and 75% to be elected through party lists. As a result, we are having an old 50:50 system, which in principle may conserve the situation in the parliament and prevent political rotation.

The relations between branches of power were traditionally difficult. The first part of 2001 was shaken by a parliament-government crisis caused by rivalry between different political actors. The crisis had a strong flavor of the 2004 presidential elections, rather than the 2002 parliamentary race, and culminated in the dismissal of Victor Yushchenko and his government on April 26, 2001, by the parliament’s no-confidence vote.

Actually, the crisis began to simmer at the beginning of 2001, and then was enhanced by the division of the parliamentary majority into the “pro-government” and the “pro-presidential” parts. The former included factions of the two Rukhs, the Reforms-Congress, the Batkivshchyna, and part of the Greens. The latter was represented by the SDPU(o), the Vidrodzhennya Rehioniv, the Trudova Ukraina, the People’s Democratic party, later joined by the Regions of Ukraine and the Solidarity. Hence, the majority that had emerged from the “velvet revolution” of early 1999 (that had removed Communists and other left-wingers from key positions in the parliament) ceased to exist and was reduced to a myth, though officially none of 281 MPs withdrew from the majority. Political mutations had their impact on the parliamentary majority that adopted different configurations and was branded differently in the media: from the “communo-oligarchic” majority that “made the Yushchenko government resign” to the “communo-nationalist” that ousted his rival Victor Medvedchuk from his position of First Vice Speaker on December 13, 2001. Commenting on Medvedchuk’s dismissal, Yushchenko argued that

was “horse-trading with political course in order to unite the left and financial-oligarchic circles” (UNIAN, April 19, 2001). The press service of the SDPU(o) condemned the dismissal of their leaders as the “alliance” of “communists and nationalists”. The rivals’ rhetoric only underlined the end of the process that symbolically buried the parliamentary majority.

In 2001, the long-debated idea of creating a coalition government was not realized again, though it was one of the key points of the March 2001 conflict between the government and the parliament. Paradoxically, the phrase “coalition government” emerged from the Cabinet of Ministers – according to official representative of the Government in the parliament Serhiy Sobolev, who said: “unfortunately, and I admit that, the phrase “coalition government” came from the building of the Cabinet of Ministers” (Kyivsky Telegraph, February 5, 2001). Numerous consultations between the government and the parliament about shared responsibility failed to bring consensus between different political groups and branches of power. Yushchenko stated that “the government was not politically authorized by anyone to form a coalition government, this is not logical, because the whole motivation for formation of a coalition government goes primarily through the formation of a coalition itself (UNIAN, March 2, 2001). The ideal of a coalition government was initiated in the parliament by the SDPU(o) and supported by the Trudova Ukraina. The failure to agree on it can be seen as one of the reasons for the dismissal of the Yushchenko government.

The idea of a coalition government as a modification of political responsibility for the situation in the state was not implemented in the government of Anatoly Kinakh either. Kinakh, appointed to the position of prime minister following the votes of 239 MPs on May 29, 2001, kept most of the “inherited” government. Most of ministers of the Yushchenko government were re-appointed, and former vice prime minister for the fuel and energy complex Oleg Dubina was promoted to the position of the first vice prime minister.

A specific political innovation of 2001 was the introduction, in the context of the stumbling administrative reform, of the institution of state secretaries by President Kuchma’s decree on May 29. According to the decree, state secretaries are appointed and dismissed by the President, which gives him additional influence on the government in conditions when the law on the Cabinet of Ministers is missing – a law that could settle relations between the government and the parliament and provide answers to a number of other questions.

Notwithstanding the ruination of the parliamentary majority, the parliament managed to approve the Criminal Code and the Land Code that had been stored for years. The Land Code, dubbed as the “Land Constitution”, was approved regardless of conflicting views on the issues of land privatization and the ways of addressing agrarian problems, regardless of the massive rally organized by the left-wingers. The land Code was approved by 232 votes.

The past year was marked by the launch of a few political projects and political brand names, some of them rather successful, others hardly remembered at all. For instance, few remember the establishment of the Ukrainian Pravysya on January 21, 2001, though the foundation forum of the block gathered almost 1,000 participants representing 11 political parties and 20 NGOs, including the Ukrainian People’s Rukh (Kostenko), Batkivshchyna, the Ukrainian Republican Party, Sobor, the Social-national Party, the Christian People’s Union, the Party of Support of national Manufacturers, Ukrainian Cossacks, the Prosvita, the Union of Ukrainian Officers, the Young Rukh, the All-Ukrainian Association of Veterans, the Ukrainian Students’ Union, etc.

Some political projects proved to be rather logical and successful from the perspective of involvement in the election race. The year of lasting political positioning and migration, 2001 was the year of competition of some political forces in the regions, and regional elites built up muscles in relations with the center. It proved to be increasingly difficult to dismiss a regional official simply by command from the official Kyiv. Heads of regional state administrations (routinely referred to as “governors”), particularly in industrially strong Kharkiv, Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk and Kyiv, began playing their own political games.

2001 was the year of arrival of the powerful Donetsk “clan” to the front scene of Ukrainian politics, reflected in the emergence and growth of influence of a primarily regional party that claims to be national, the Party of the Regions. The party was formed on March 3, 2001 from a rather amorphous formation: a party of Regional Renaissance “Working Solidarity of Ukraine”. At the end of March

2001, a parliamentary faction (!) "Regions of Ukraine" was formed. Nine out of seventeen of its members have their political and business roots in the Donetsk region. The party has experienced a change of leadership lately: its initial chairman, head of the State Taxation Administration Mykola Azarov resigned in December 2001, and Vice Prime Minister Semynozhenko took over. The Donetsk political "elite" is increasingly aggressive and successful in storming its way to the top. The recent achievement of the Donetsk lobby at the end of December 2001 was the appointment of member of the Party of the Regions, member of the Board of the National Bank of Ukraine and member of the Regions of Ukraine Igor Yushchko, MP, to the position of Minister of Finance of Ukraine. Just a couple of weeks before Mr. Yushchko was appointed to the position of state secretary of the Ministry of Finance. Before becoming an MP in 1998, he chaired the Donetsk-based First Ukrainian International Bank. Hence, the Donetsk group is now in control of both the revenue part of the national budget (through the State Taxation Administration, still chaired by Azarov) and the expenditure part (through the Ministry of Finance), which is particularly important in the pre-election context.

There are a number of other political brands whose authors claim significant roles in the future parliament and, possibly, in the 2004 presidential elections. These include the block of "parties of power", "Za Yedynu Ukrainu". At the end of November 2001, presidential chief of staff Volodymyr Lytvyn became the leader of that block, and Prime Minister Kinakh joined the block as number two. The formal agreement between the members of the block was signed on December 15, but discussions about details continue. The block includes the Trudova Ukraina, the Party of the Regions, the PDP, the Agrarian Party, and the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. Hence, the block's list will include top executive officials of this state: Prime Minister Kinakh (Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs), Vice Prime Minister Volodymyr Semynozhenko (Party of the Regions), Minister of transportation Valery Pustovoitenko (leader of the PDP), Minister of Agrarian Policy Ivan Kyrylenko (member of the Agrarian party), and, possible, Vice Prime Minister Leonid Kozachenko (member of the Agrarian party). Under the new election law, state officials and civil servants do not have to take a leave when running for parliament. Therefore, there is little doubt which of the candidates and blocks will be favored by local bureaucrats.

A strong political force that will be taking part in the elections and hopes to receive the "control package" of shares in the next parliament is Victor Yushchenko's Nasha Ukraina. The block includes the two Rukh parties (led by Udovenko and Kostenko), the Party Reforms and Order, Solidarnist, and a number of smaller parties and NGOs. However, the final election list of the block still remains to be seen.

Another actor is BYuTi (pronounced in Ukrainian as "Beauty"), the block of ex-vice-prime minister of the Yushchenko government Yulia Tymoshenko. The ByuTi is, in fact, a remake of the National Salvation Forum, the structure established on July 11, 2001 by Yulia Tymoshenko's Batkivshchyna, and a number of small parties like "Sobor", the Ukrainian Republican Party, the Ukrainian Social Democratic Party, the Ukrainian Christian Democratic Party, the Ukrainian Conservative Republican Party, and the Patriotic Party. The block declares opposition to the president and the government. It is a question whether the block will manage to do well in the elections and overcome the 4% barrier without access to the media and support from local authorities. The BYuTi represents the forces that positioned themselves in the "tapegate" but lost momentum in 2001. The last tent camp was removed from the central square of Kyiv on March 1, 2001. Today the opposition is divided and weak, and the government and the presidential power are basically the same as before the events of November 28, 2000.

Lat year also brought a new stage of rapprochement between Ukraine and Russia, as well as conservation of relations with the European Union. Russia announced 2002 to be the year of Ukraine and promised to take part in financing the construction of the Khmelnytsky and the Rivne nuclear power plants. In December 2001, at least two significant Ukrainian-Russian events took place: the congress of ethnic Ukrainians in Moscow and the meeting of Ukrainian and Russian businessmen in Kharkiv. Shortly before the end of the year Russia and Ukraine finally signed an agreement on transit of the Russian gas through the territory of Ukraine in 2002. The dialogue, therefore, is likely to continue.

Meanwhile, according to the recent opinion poll conducted by the Ukrainian Institute of Social Research and the Social Monitoring Center on December 13-21, 2001, Ukrainians believe that the top events of 2001 were "appointment of the new prime minister", "10th anniversary of Ukraine's independence", "the Pope's visit", "the destruction of a civilian plane by the Ukrainian missile" and "the census" (each mentioned by 10-12% of the respondents). 56% believed that the key event of the

year was the terrorist attack on the USA.

Anyway, the 2001 events will shape the social and political landscape in 2002. The long list of unanswered questions will have to be addressed both by the people and the government – the former at the polling stations, the latter in the race for votes. We wish the choice were conscious and the race were fair. However, the 2001 realities suggest that the wishes may be over-optimistic.