

Ukrainian parliament: sketching a political portrait

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According to all sorts of forecasts, the current political autumn is going to be immensely tense. On the one hand, the MPs are expected to deal with at least 349 draft bills, including 84 that have already been prepared for their scrutiny. On the other hand, the current political season, as the logic of recent developments suggest, is bound to evolve in the environment of a political intrigue linked to expectations of implementation of the April 2000 referendum results and making amendments to the constitution.

Yet, surprisingly, the controversy over the implementation that had shaken the Ukrainian policy-making and policy-commenting communities has moved back from the spotlight recently. Instead, increasing significance is gained by a multi-faceted process of debating the draft bill "On the State Budget of Ukraine for the Year of 2001" and a number of other economic bills, including the Taxation Code. Officials of the Cabinet of Ministers realize that avoiding tough battles over the draft budget would be a hard thing to do. Prime Minister Yushchenko publicly admitted that he did not count on the Rada to pass the budget promptly.

Another facet of the budget theme relates to the future of this government in general and some of its members in particular. The adoption of the budget by the parliament can be closely linked to reshuffles in the Cabinet. The forecast is based on some noteworthy symptoms, including the uncertain position of Minister of Finance Igor Mitiukov: while the Prime Minister is reportedly prepared to substitute Mitiukov with somebody else, the President, reportedly, sees no adequately qualified alternative at the moment.

Hence, this political season will be determined by two key issues: the debates over the 2001 state budget and the high-profile implementation process. The two are logically linked in a sense that positive conclusion of both of them required a more or less consolidated parliamentary majority, capable of coordination of obvious and hidden interests, ambitions and agendas of a variety of political forces represented in the legislature. No wonder President Kuchma described the process of debates over the 2001 budget, submitted by the government to the parliament on September 15, primarily as a "political act" (Holos Ukrainy, September 21, 2000).

Similarly, the definition of "political act" (even with a capitalized "P") can be referred to the process of implementation of the results of the national referendum of April 16, 2000. Although the parliament engaged in the process in mid-summer, having voted on July 13 by 251 "yeah" for the President's draft bill of amendments to the country's Fundamental Law, key issues remain unresolved, as the task of securing approval of at least 300 MPs is almost as hard as it was in spring, no matter how much strategists at the Presidential Administration wish it.

In order to finalize the implementation efforts and reach the target figure of 300, the initiators of this "political act" need to gather 49 more voting cards, which is a far too hard thing to do. Besides bargaining and political agreements, the implementation is largely dependent on inter-faction migration and reshuffles that are under way and likely to occur in the near future. The implementation that has been so vigorously discussed by some activists of the "majority" has been seriously challenged by the problems within the "majority".

Oleksandr Volkov, one of the initiators of the referendum and implementation of its results into the Ukrainian legislation has been quoted as noting that the steady majority in the Ukrainian parliament lists only 160 to 165 MPs, for only six factions of the "majority" take part in the voting regularly (Kievskiy Telegraf, September 18, 2000). Those include the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine (United), the Greens, the People's Democratic Party, the Trudova Ukraina and the Vidrozhennya Rehioniv. Therefore, according to Volkov, in order to make the sure the process is successful, the centrists and the parliament's leadership will have to do homework on some left-wing factions.

However, the left-wingers are no more enthusiastic about the implementation process that before. Ukrainian communists are still reluctant to support the implementation of the referendum results. One of the faction's influential members Georgy Kriuchkov was quoted as arguing that "the Administration will be unable to secure votes of 300 MPs that are necessary for the implementation. Therefore, [they] will not manage to approve the draft bill on changes to the Constitution in the form that was proposed by the President of Ukraine" (Kievskiy Telegraf, September 18, 2000).

The problem has yet another dimension. The traditional tension in the relations between the President and the parliamentary "minority" has been manifested recently by an attempt to initiate the procedure of impeaching President Kuchma undertaken by the parliament's "mafia fighters" Hryhory

Omelchenko, MP and Anatoly Yermak, MP. Shortly after the beginning of the new session they presented the parliament with a draft resolution "On Initiating the Issue of Dismissing President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma from his Position through Impeachment and Creation of a Special Ad Hoc Investigation Commission to Investigate Activities of Kuchma L.D. in the Capacity of Prime Minister and the President of Ukraine". However, on September 14, 2000 the parliament voted down the draft resolution and refused to include the hearing in the agenda for September 2000. Only 140 MPs voted in favor of proceeding with the impeachment proposal. The parliamentary "majority" - Trudova Ukraina, Vidrodzhennya Rehioniv, Solidarnist, United Social Democrats, Batkivshchyna, both People's Rukhs, the PDP, the Greens and the Reformy-Kongres - either voted against it (64 votes) or abstained (4 votes) or did not vote (121 votes). Yet, from the very beginning it was clear that the attempt was doomed for political failure. On the eve of the voting, leader of Ukrainian communists Petro Symonenko announced support for the Omelchenko-Yermak proposal, thus, having demonstrated that traditional political focus of left-wingers underwent no change.

Instead, the beginning of the new political season was marked by major disarray in the parliamentary "majority". The processes logically indicate further change in the structure of the parliamentary "majority" and the struggle for the role of the political "first violin" in that "orchestra". The tendencies can be seen in migration of some MPs between factions and groups, and in slight but noteworthy "weight loss" by some factions. Moreover, given this change in the parliament, the result of a regular rotation of the leadership of the parliamentary "majority" and substitution of Leonid Kravchuk (SDPU(o)) as its coordinator look rather symptomatic. On September 21, 2000, the majority of the 11-faction "majority" (198 MPs out of 271) voted for passing the role of its coordinator (that de facto makes its performer a top lobbyist in the parliament) to leader of the People's Democratic Party Oleksandr Karpov. Other, less successful candidates for the role included Igor Sharov (Trudova Ukraina), Oleksandr Pukhkal (Batkivshchyna) and the leader of the Ukrainian People's Rukh Yuri Kostenko. Probably, harsh political "battles" within the majority may accompany the process of selection of a deputy coordinator. Although both of the positions are informal and serve primarily organizational purposes, they are very important as they enable their holders to influence the process of agenda-forming and decision-making. The choice in favor of specific political forces within the "majority" will serve as an indicator of further development of inter-faction trends and attitudes to the future of this government and the process of implementation of changes to the constitution.

While almost all centrist factions and groups have been affected by inter-faction migration, some of the moves indicate efforts to re-group forces and re-shape spheres of influence within the parliament. For instance, former head of the Naftogaz Ukrainy Igor Bakai (who had won his seat in the by-election on June 25, 2000 at the constituency No. 64 of the Zhytomyr region) left the pro-government Reformy-Kongress faction and joined Oleksandr Volkov's "Vidrodzhennya Rehioniv". The faction got yet another new recruit: Pavlo Ryabikin, a businessman who had also won his seat in the recent by-election at the constituency No. 130 of the Mykolayiv region. Due to the new recruits, the 37-strong "Vidrodzhennya Rehioniv" became the parliament's third largest faction.

The "Trudova Ukraina" group, recently joined by newly-elected MP, Yaroslav Sukhyi, former deputy director general of the Motor-Sich plant, (constituency No. 78 of the Zaporizhzhya region) now numbers 45 MPs and is the second largest entity in the parliament. The 115-strong Communist party's faction, recently joined by former Vice Speaker Adam Martyniuk, remains the most numerous one, but its influence has been severely undermined by its "minority" status and the loss of control of all committees as a result of the January 2000 "velvet revolution" in the parliament.

Some of the factions suffered minor losses, slight but poignant, and demonstrative of the dynamics of political processes linked to reduction of power and influence of some political actors. The People's Democratic faction lost two members - leaders of the Christian Democratic party of Ukraine Vitaly Zhuravsky and Serhiy Kyrychenko. Long ago (in relative terms), in April 1998, the PDP faction was the second most numerous (after the Communists) faction in the new parliament, and numbered 70 MPs, 40 of which were not members of the party. The non-partisan recruits represented a number of parties that lost the election (like 4 members of the Agrarian party) or businessmen who won seats in majoritarian constituencies. By early May 1998 the faction membership had grown to 85. However, at a certain stage the party and the faction began losing influence, primarily due to the loss of access to the so-called "administrative resource" available through affiliation of a number of regional and local executive officials with the "party of power". The break-up of the wing led by Anatoly Matvienko (later on, the leader of Sobor and vehement opponent to Leonid Kuchma's political course) and the parliament's refusal to approve the re-appointment of Valery Pustovoitenko after Leonid Kuchma's second presidential victory further undermined the party's influence. The election of Ivan Pliushch as the Speaker by the "majority" in January, and the recent election of Oleksandr Karpov as the "majority" coordinator may indicate rather successful efforts of the PDP to restore its influence, even though

reaching the past influence of the former "party of power" in full would be hardly possible now. More likely, the election of Karpov represents a compromise within the "majority" rather than signifies a tendency of increasing the PDP's role in the Ukrainian political environment.

Some losses have been suffered by Yulia Tymoshenko's Batkivshchyna faction, "deserted" in early September by former Acting Attorney General of Ukraine Oleg Lytvak and former deputy chairman of the Committee for fighting organized crime and corruption Victor Razvadovsky, who had "migrated" earlier from the PDP and the SDPU(o) factions. The fact can be interpreted as an indicator of shrinking influence of Vice Prime Minister Tymoshenko, who once started the Batkivshchyna from the wreckage of Pavlo Lazarenko's once powerful Hromada, which she reportedly had broken up. The formation of the Batkivshchyna was announced in the parliament on March 4, 1999, shortly after Pavlo Lazarenko was arrested in Switzerland. At that time the Batkivshchyna numbered 21 MPs, but now it is at risk of repeating the ill fate of the Hromada.

Another noteworthy event was Oleksandr Lavrynovych's decision to join the Rukh (led by Hennady Udovenko). A generally respected and potentially strong politician, Lavrynovych had remained in the political "shadow" for about a year, but finally decided that his broad experience could be useful for consolidation of the right-wing forces. A new stage of the stumbling consolidation process was signified by the renewed talks between the leaderships of the two Rukhs and a meeting between Hennady Udovenko and Yuri Kostenko. Though, it is still too early to look for any particular political outcome of the renewed contacts.

Hence, nowadays the faction map looks as follows: besides the "giants" described above, on September 6, 2000 the SDPU(o) includes 33 MPs (while Victor Suslov left the faction, Ivan Boichuk joined in); the Solidarnist lists 27 MPs; the Ukrainian People's Rukh (Kostenko) - 21 MP; the People's Rukh of Ukraine (Udovenko) - 19 MPs; the Socialist party - 17 MP, and the Reformy-Kongres - 15 MPs.

Another noteworthy element of the parliament's life that can be seen as an indicator of the current trends within the "majority" is the emergence of a new faction, "Yabluko", led by Mykhailo Brodsky, ex-chairman of the Dendy concern, ex-co-owner of the Kievskie Vedomosti daily, and ex-representative of the Pechersk borough council of Kyiv. Following the 1998 parliamentary election he joined the Hromada, but left the faction in September 1999. At the end of November 1999 Brodsky announced that a new parliamentary group, "Yabluko", would be established in early December, and claimed that 11 MPs were willing to join. However, the desired result was achieved only in mid-September 2000, when the emergence of the new 14-member "Yabluko" faction was formally announced in the parliament. The most noteworthy detail is the recruitment by the faction of a former Socialist and then member of the SDPU(o), Victor Suslov - the politician who had chaired the parliamentary commission for investigation of activities of the National Bank of Ukraine then led by Victor Yushchenko. The commission's materials later inspired the investigators of the NBU case and coincided with the major charges addressed to the NBU by the IMF. Given the long record of Mr. Suslov's special attitude to Victor Yushchenko, the new "Yabluko" may be unlikely to be supportive of this government's policy. At one of the faction's first press conferences, on September 18, 2000, the "Yabluko" leaders poignantly remarked that "the Prime Minister of Ukraine, reporting about results of his work to citizens, speaks mainly about his populist resolutions, but does not focus on the looming problems" (Kievskie Vedomosti, September 19, 2000). Apparently, the issue of lobbying staff reshuffles in the government may be seen as critical by the "Yabluko". From the very start, member of the "Yabluko" and Brodsky's long-term backer Victor Chaika publicly announced that "nowadays we would propose two well-prepared ministers and two well-prepared governors [for the position of] the Prime Minister in the future in order to work in a team" (Stolichnye Novosti, September 19, 2000). Such statements give reason to doubt about the degree of support for the budget, proposed by Yushchenko, and other government-sponsored draft bills. Since no time framework was given by the "Yabluko" leadership for "the future", it is likely that the relevant political forces are already fully prepared for the race.

On the other hand, there is no need to overestimate the strength and importance of the "Yabluko" lobby in the parliament. Rather, such views and declared interests may serve as good indicators for further polarization of the forces in the parliament, and primarily the "majority" regarding the government. Under the burden of key tasks, the "majority" is undergoing the major "multi-vectored" identity crisis. The conditional and unsteady entity that was once planned as a political monolith finds it increasingly difficult to ignore the presence of a pro-government group that is likely to support this government and Victor Yushchenko personally whatever the political change. The core of this group may be formed by the Batkivshchyna, both of the Rukh factions, the Reformy-Kongres, part of the PDP and part of the Greens. Some signs of the polarization can already be seen: for instance, the growing internal tension in the "majority" with regard to its attitude to the government may be illustrated by the refusal of the above factions to support the recent initiative of the "Vidrodzhennya Rehioniv" and the SDPU(o) to

summon the top government officials to the parliament and make them answer some unpleasant questions about the situation in the country's fuel and energy complex. Hence, while most of the above make only a sketch of the broad picture of the Ukrainian parliament, currently it displays trends to polarization of the centers of influence, and the "majority" suffers from the trend like never before.