

# Ukraine is heading for new parliamentary elections, but the country still lacks real political parties

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On 25 August, Ukraine's President, Petro Poroshenko, dissolved parliament and called new elections for 26 October. [Taras Kuzio](#) provides an overview of Ukraine's party system ahead of the elections, noting that in many respects the country still lacks genuine political parties of the kind found in other European states. He argues that without strong political parties it will be difficult to establish a real parliamentary democracy in Ukraine.



Ukraine celebrated its 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of independence on 24 August and, after signing an Association Agreement with the EU, the country is finally moving from the crossroads towards Europe. One of the first decisions made by the Euromaidan leadership last February was to return the country to its 2004 parliamentary constitution used during Viktor Yushchenko's presidency (2006-2010). Former eastern European and Baltic communist countries that have adopted parliamentarianism have progressed furthest in their democratisation while super-presidential, authoritarian regimes are the norm in Eurasia. Indeed, Georgia and Moldova, two other countries that [have signed](#) Association Agreements with the EU, are the only others (besides Ukraine) who possess parliamentary systems in the CIS.

Parliamentary – unlike Eurasian super-presidential – systems require strong political parties that do not exist in Eurasia. Ukraine is seeking to emulate Eastern Europe by adopting a parliamentary system while at the same time suffering from similar problems to Eurasian countries with respect to being unable to establish real political parties. In this sense there are four key impediments which have prevented Ukraine from establishing genuine political parties in the country.

## Why does Ukraine not possess real political parties?

The first answer to this question is the Soviet legacy. Pre-Soviet political parties are a distant memory in Ukraine, which is one of the key factors differentiating Eurasia from Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. An additional element is the de-ideologisation of the USSR during its last two decades when communist ideology stagnated within the party. Soviet Ukraine, with the largest republic communist party, had 3.5 million members, of whom only five per cent re-joined the newly registered [Communist Party](#) (KPU) in 1993.

The last time democratic and national communist political parties were active in eastern Ukraine was nearly a century ago, while in western Ukraine it was in the 1930s when they were eclipsed by the [Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists](#) (OUN). OUN and its partisan army dominated western Ukraine in the 1940s and early 1950s, and OUN's three wings have dominated post-World War II émigré politics. The legacy of democratic political parties in the three Baltic countries survived because they were independent states while western Ukraine was part of inter-war Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania.

The weakness of pre-Soviet legacies in Eurasia has led to a proliferation of two types of political parties. The first, outgrowths of the former Communist Party that transformed into presidential parties of power – including [Unified Russia](#), led by President Vladimir Putin – are most often nationalist, populist and authoritarian. The second are products of Soviet-era dissidents and national democratic forces such as [Rukh](#) and [Our Ukraine](#), who are usually anti-Russian and pro-Western.

A second factor inhibiting party development is the still widely prevalent provincialism of Ukrainian political and business elites. For example, Viktor Yushchenko's marriage to a Ukrainian-American or Yulia Tymosenko's

daughter's marriage to an Englishman (and her studies at the LSE) did not encourage either political leader to learn English. President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk are the first English-speakers in these positions. English-speaking Ukrainian professional elites have found careers in the City of London, Washington DC and Brussels and far fewer in Kyiv.

Provincialism is compounded by weak interaction between Ukrainian and Western political studies with a miniscule number of Ukrainians published in Western academic journals. Indeed, only one Ukrainian political scientist has received an academic position in the West since 1991.

Third, national identity and regional diversity have also made it difficult to establish pan-national parties. Italy, with deep regional divisions of its own has national parties and all of Canada's federal parties receive votes in Francophone Quebec. Violent Russian-backed separatism in Donbas, the base of the disgraced [Party of Regions](#) and soon to be banned KPU, will make it even more difficult to establish national parties. The Party of Regions and KPU monopolised power in Russophone eastern and southern Ukraine and the region now has a major political vacuum with their demise. Party of Regions presidential candidate Mykhaylo Dobkin received a paltry three per cent in May's presidential elections (compared to Viktor Yanukovich's 44 and 48 per cent in 2004 and 2010 respectively).

Finally, Ukraine is, according to Transparency International, the most corrupt country in Europe and therefore corruption is another factor that has inhibited the emergence of strong parties. Compounding this is the continued influence of oligarchs as business and politics continues to remain closely entangled. Opaque funding from Ukraine's large shadow economy (accounting for 40-50 per cent of GDP) and from offshore tax havens in Europe and the Caribbean has made it impossible to control spending in elections and oligarch-backed virtual parties.

The gas lobby has invested in both the Party of Regions and democratic alternatives to its archenemy, Yulia Tymoshenko, who have included Yatseniuk (2010), Vitali Klitschko and Poroshenko (since 2011) and Oleh Lyashko (leader of another virtual political force, this time the Radical party) more recently. Gas lobby leader Dmytro Firtash, awaiting deportation in Vienna to the US to stand trial on corruption charges, convinced Klitschko to drop out of this year's presidential election and support Poroshenko, who won. The populist nationalist Lyashko came third.

### The 2014 parliamentary elections

Ukraine is set to hold parliamentary elections on 26 October and the likelihood is that the newly elected parliament will be more virtual than its predecessor elected in 2012. Poroshenko and Yatseniuk have been two of the biggest 'flip floppers' in Ukrainian politics. The former leads a party with the title [Solidarity](#), which is his third with that name; the first was one of five that merged to establish the Party of Regions (2000-2001) while the second merged with others to form Yushchenko's [People's Union-Our Ukraine](#) (2005). Solidarity-3 has no web site, central headquarters, regional party infrastructure or party newspaper and yet receives first or second place in Ukrainian opinion polls because of name recognition with Poroshenko.

International boxing star Klitschko heads the equally virtual [UDAR](#) (meaning 'punch' but an abbreviation for Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms). Although popular and receiving third place in opinion polls, it is doubtful that Klitschko will survive his full term as Kyiv Mayor as he already is the butt of jokes about his common gaffes. Indeed, although Kyiv supported the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan, their last two elected mayors have both been deemed 'intellectually challenged' – the notoriously corrupt Leonid Chernovetsky, who spent a lot of his time in



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Israel rather than in Kyiv, and Klitschko.

Besides the Klitschko-Poroshenko alliance, who may receive a parliamentary majority in the upcoming elections, there is also [Batkivshchina](#) (Fatherland), Tymoshenko's political force. While she was in prison, Yatseniuk was elected leader after his [Front for Change](#) merged with her party. Although Batkivshchina is likely to elect fewer deputies than in 2012, Tymoshenko will be one of them and there will inevitably be a competition for the leadership position. While Batkivshchina is a member of the centre-right EPP (European People's Party) and Tymoshenko likes to portray herself as a Ukrainian 'Margaret Thatcher' the party is as eclectic as all Ukrainian political forces. Tymoshenko, who likes to praise 'solidarism', holds views close to the British Labour party.

Ultimately, there are many institutions required for a parliamentary democracy and one of them is the strong political parties that Ukraine lacks. This is a factor Western organisations and international institutions should keep to the forefront of their minds when fashioning future policies towards Ukraine.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

### **Taras Kuzio** – *University of Alberta*

Taras Kuzio is Research Associate in the Centre for Political and Regional Studies in the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta and Fellow in the Center for Transatlantic Relations in the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.



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