



UKRAINIAN PARLIAMENT UNLIKELY TO SPEED UP ARMY REFORM

Yes, there is something we can do. But not very much. This is the impression from a round-table discussion between the top representatives of eight political parties and blocs, entitled "Elections-2002: the positions of parties and blocs on Ukrainian military policy", which was held by the Razumkov Center think-tank on 13 February and sponsored by the British embassy in Ukraine.

On the one hand, this was the first public debate between political parties, authoritative experts, foreign observers and journalists in a difficult situation ahead of the parliamentary elections. On the other, detailed coverage of the round-table meeting was provided only by Internet publications and the print media. Only 200 people had the privilege to "enjoy" the process and participate in discussions and private conversations.

[Passage omitted: the meeting was highly professional]

Differences over foreign military priorities

A close look at the debate reveals that the most fierce conflict of opinions and position concerns such a "burning" and politically sensitive issue as Ukrainian foreign policy priorities in the military area: the neutral status, NATO or the Tashkent [CIS collective security] treaty (that is, Russia).

The totally different positions of parties and blocs can be seen in their answers on which is the lead organization to ensure European security. The [government's] For a United Ukraine bloc and the Green Party of Ukraine see NATO as the lead organization. The positions of the Nataliya Vitrenko [leader of the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine] and the United Social Democratic Party of Ukraine [USDPU] surprisingly coincided: both think that the UN should be such an organization. Other parties and blocs prefer European organizations: the European Union ([opposition] Yuliya Tymoshenko Bloc) and the OSCE (Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine bloc, the Communist Party of Ukraine and the Socialist Party of Ukraine).

Only two parties, the Greens and the Socialists, will continue to support Ukrain's neutral status. Others think that Ukraine should join a politico-military bloc. The centre-right and centrist political forces (Our Ukraine, For a United Ukraine, Yuliya Tymoshenko and USDPU) want Ukraine to join NATO, while the left forces (Progressive Socialists and Communists) prefer the Tashkent treaty.

Therefore, the new parliament will hardly be able to clearly determine the principles of Ukrainian foreign military policy or set them, either by passing an agreement on Ukraine's entry into a politico-military bloc or amending the Ukrainian constitution's provision for a neutral status.

Parties agree army in dire straits

The differences between the right and the left forces are less noticeable on the majority of other issues, the discussion of which does not promise to attract broad public attention: internal policy principles in the military sector and purely military aspects of army reform.

For instance, spending on national defence was described as insufficient almost unanimously. The left and opposition parties and blocs defined it as "extremely low", while pro-presidential and centre-right forces - as "low". Only the Greens said that the budget allocation for defence was sufficient. The Greens probably think that funding should be increased only after the army becomes a professional one. Then, according to the party leader, Vitaliy Kononov, "the money won't be wasted".

A general indicator of the state of the Ukrainian armed forces can be seen in the comments on their ability to safeguard Ukraine's sovereignty against military threats. Practically all parties and blocs, apart from the USDPU, think that the Ukrainian armed forces are incapable of protecting it today. For a United Ukraine thinks it is hard to give a definite answer and that, with some reservations, the Ukrainian army can protect Ukraine's sovereignty.

The parties and blocs are going to solve the problem of increasing the military capability of the armed forces and other military units by strengthening civilian control over the military, in particular. For instance, all the parties and blocs agree that candidates for defence minister and heads of other security structures should be approved by parliament because this would strengthen parliamentary supervision over their activities. For a United Ukraine is an exception because it thinks such a scheme will "complicate decision-making on appointments".

No consensus on cuts, professional army

We should point out there is little difference in the approach of parties and blocs to army reform priorities. All of them named the following priorities in overcoming the crisis within the Ukrainian armed forces: reducing the armed forces and increasing their funding at the same time.

Almost all the parties and blocs (apart from Yuliya Tymoshenko and the Communists) think that the current politico-military situation in the region and the world allows Ukraine to reduce its armed forces radically. However, the figure to which the army needs to be cut varies from 250,000 (For a United Ukraine and the Socialists) to 100,000 (Our Ukraine).

Most parties and blocs share the view that it is possible to reduce the length of conscript service to 12 months. They also almost unanimously (apart from the left parties) support the transformation of the Ukrainian armed forces into a professional army. But they differ regarding the speed of the transformation. Our Ukraine and the Greens think the transformation is possible in three to five years. Other political forces propose a slower approach and postpone the transformation to a more distant future: from five to seven years (The Socialists) to 10-15 years (For a United Ukraine and Yuliya Tymoshenko).

We can thus assume that the radical reduction of the Ukrainian armed forces, as well as their funding, will remain the subject of heated debates in parliament. At the same time, given that the positions on the level of cuts reduction differ considerably, decisive steps will hardly be taken any time soon. The same applies to the transformation of the armed forces into a professional army, because the majority of political forces put off the reform beyond the life of the next parliament. The only issue genuinely likely to be considered by the next parliament is a cut in the length of conscript service.

There are practically no differences of opinion on the military's social security. Almost all the parties and blocs believe it is inadequate. Only For a United Ukraine's opinion is different. It believes current welfare provision of the armed forces' personnel is sufficient. The bloc's representative, Mr Hnidenko, said this view is based on the fact that the government needs to look after 14 million pensioners and a heap of other social problems in addition to this one.

Nation supports professional army

It turned out that the views expressed nationwide mainly accord with the positions of parties and blocs. There are some deviations, though. Trying to assess Ukrainians' attitude towards some of the military issues, Razumkov Centre conducted a poll on 8-16 January 2002. It questioned 2,019 people aged 18 and over in all of Ukraine's Regions (the error margin was 2.3 per cent).

First of all, we should note that the armed forces are more trusted than any other state institution: 28.2 per cent of those polled "fully trusted" them in January 2002 and 36 per cent "trusted more than distrusted". Given this, the activities of the armed forces and their problems cannot but affect and concern the public. In particular, the greater majority of respondents described current budget spending on national defence as clearly insufficient: 43 per cent consider it low, 23.5 per cent - too low and only 7.7 per cent - sufficient. The view that defence expenditure exceeds the required level is supported by a little more than 2 per cent: 1.5 are sure that spending is high and 0.8 per cent consider it very high.

Given this view on military spending, it is no wonder that, despite the high levels of trust in the army, more than half of Ukrainians (58.7 per cent) do not believe that the armed forces and other military units are capable of safeguarding the country from military threats, and 23.8 per cent support the opposite opinion. It is common knowledge there is a huge gap between the normal requirements of the armed forces and their current strength on the one hand, and actual defence spending, on the other.

Meanwhile, the idea of reducing the armed forces failed to attract a majority of either supporters or opponents. Views differ greatly as to whether the armed forces need to be cut once the politico-military situation in the region and in the world permits Ukraine to do so. Almost a third of those polled (31 per cent) consider radical reduction possible, 46.4 per cent - impossible and 22.6 per cent could not say yes or no. In this situation, we should obviously recognize that stereotypes of the past, when the army's ability to protect a country from foreign threat was measured in the numerical strength of its armed forces, still exist in our society.

The most unequivocal answers were given to the question on the transition to a professional army. The idea was supported by 73.6 per cent of those polled and opposed by only 14.2 per cent.

Generally speaking, we can note that as military issues go, the positions of political parties and blocs, their programmes and election manifestos, and the opinions of party leaders and representatives produce a favourable impression. Parties and blocs have declared their intentions to resolve the most burning financial and social issues and to strengthen civilian control over the military. Such intentions generally coincide with the views of future voters, Ukrainian citizens. What is especially heartening is that parties and blocs have certain plans and blueprints regarding the military and, which is important, are ready to nominate persons capable of heading not only parliamentary committees but security structures as well.

[Passage omitted: Razumkov Centre's experts consider NATO as a strategic partner but does not recommend to join it.]



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