

Ukraine: New personnel, old problems

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After the presidential election in April 2019, Volodymyr Selenskyj has now also won the parliamentary elections, brought forward to July 21, with an absolute majority of seats in the Rada (parliament) for himself and his new "People's Servant" party, Sluha Narodu. Since he had no support in the old Rada on which to base his government, the early election was only logical. On the basis of this result, he now wants to carry through the profound change in Ukrainian society, for which he called, without encountering parliamentary obstacles or having to take into account squabbling coalition partners.

This, at any rate, is what the majority of Ukrainian citizens expect. And they are not alone in that; the friends and supporters of the "independent" Ukraine in the West also hope, albeit with some scepticism, for a "new start". In addition to all the reservations about Selenskyj and his ability to actually introduce change, Western commentators agree that there has at least been one winner: democracy. The fact that the change of office took place "peacefully", without a mass brawl in the Rada, is considered a success.

The election

In any case, as far as public opinion is concerned, the first important step in the right direction has been taken. With his new party, Selenskyj won 43.16 percent of the votes and thus 124 mandates. In addition, Sluha Narodu also won 130 direct elections and thus received a total of 254 out of 424 seats in the new Rada. Since almost 20 percent of the votes cast went to small parties that failed to pass the five-percent hurdle, 43 percent of the total was sufficient to give a solid absolute majority.

By far the strongest second party was the "Opposition Platform", supported by Russia, around the former Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Boyko and the former head of the presidential administration under Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Medvedchuk. It won 13.1 percent of the votes and 43 seats in the new Rada. The official election returns also include those for the Donetsk and Luhansk (Lugansk) regions. These showed the "Opposition Platform" as the winner, with 43.4 percent in Donetsk and 49.8 percent in Luhansk. However, these results were not included in the official result and these regions are not represented in the Rada.

Third place, with 8.2 percent (an increase of 2.5 percent = 300,000 votes) and 26 seats went to the former Prime Minister and current "gas princess" Yulia Tymoshenko and her Patriotic Party, closely followed by 8.1 percent (a loss of 13.7 percent = 2.3 million votes) and 25 seats for the Party of European Solidarity of former President Poroshenko. The new Voice Party of rock singer Svyatoslav Vakarchuk surprisingly made it to the new Rada with 5.8 percent and 20 deputies.

It is worth noting that the "unification of all nationalist and neo-fascist parties" like Swoboda, Freedom, won only 4.3 percent of the votes and thus failed to get over the 5 percent hurdle into the Rada. The number of votes for these forces fell from 1.1 million to 315,560.

Voter turnout, however, was only 49.1 percent, 3 percent below the level of the last election in October 2014, which indicates a deep demoralisation within the electorate.

Selenskyj's programme

In addition to combating the much-quoted corruption, Selenskyj had to promise first and foremost an improvement in the economic situation. However, his programme in this regard is rather nebulous and little more than catchphrases. There is talk of a "new economic strategy", of the "demonopolisation of key industries", debureaucratisation, further privatisations, simplification of the tax system and promotion of research and science. (See: <https://sluga-narodu.com/program> ^[1])

Can one imagine a "demonopolisation of key industries" without expropriating the oligarchy? Who should decide and enforce this? The further "privatisations" demanded by the West would require financially strong foreign capital investors, in addition to the oligarchy, which one does not want to strengthen any further. Does this promote the national economic base? The cost of establishing modern universities and institutes, with the engineers, equipment and academic staff necessary for research and science that could underpin a competitive industry is now estimated at 100 billion euros. But where will Ukraine get such resources from if the existing ownership and economic structure remain untouched?

Crisis

Since the West's intervention in Ukraine in connection with the right-wing Maidan movement in 2013/2014 and the coup-like assumption of government by the "chocolate oligarch" Poroshenko and the political and economic break with Russia that accompanied it, the economic situation has been declining sharply. The country was divided. The civil war in the Donbas, which has lasted since 2014, not only cost the lives of thousands of Ukrainians on both sides, but also further destroyed the economy. Whereas in 2013 the gross domestic product, GDP, per capita, was around US \$4,000, by 2018 it had fallen to \$2,960. This puts the country on a par with Laos, the Philippines and Egypt. In Europe, only the Republic of Moldova has a lower GDP per capita.

The shift towards the EU and the USA has so far borne little fruit. On the contrary, the consequences have been fatal: over 3 million people have permanently left the country and around 9 million work abroad at least temporarily, 1.5 million of them in neighbouring Poland. Foreign investments amounted to a modest \$800 million in 2018. The previous integration programme into the EU has failed completely. The EU Commission itself has admitted this. That's why it now resorts to diplomatic idioms such as that the "reforms must be made more sustainable and more credible".

The foreign debt amounts to approximately \$130 billion, and that is without the countless billions of special loans for the modernisation of the Ukrainian army in order to guarantee the maintenance of the front in the east against the Russia-friendly militias of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. At the same time, military support forms the basis for a strategic stage in the construction of a further NATO base against Russia and China. Ukraine is de facto bankrupt and insolvent. Its solvency can only be maintained by further loans from Western governments for political reasons. Thus, it is stuck in the debt trap, the stranglehold of Western states and international financial capital.

This stranglehold essentially sets the limits for President Selenskyj's programme for the modernisation of the economy and society, combined with the usual "savings programmes" for pensions, wages, health care and other "social gimmicks" at the expense of the working population. Even if Selenskyj did promise higher pensions and the expansion of the health care system in his election programme, he will hardly be able to raise the funds for this when faced with the resistance of Western creditors.

In addition, the fascist and semi-fascist forces are still there, despite the electoral defeat. Racist attacks, murders and assaults are widespread. When Nazi gangs raided a Roma camp in 2018 and killed several men, women and children, the local media only noted this on the back pages. Western journalists made a noticeable effort to ignore these consequences of Western politics.

On June 18, Zelenskyy made his inaugural visit to Berlin as the new Ukrainian president. Bravely, he gave Chancellor Merkel his profession of loyalty to the market economy, the EU and NATO and called for tougher sanctions against Russia. Wolfgang Büchele, Chairman of the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations of the German business community, then told him what had to happen in Ukraine:

"From the point of view of investors, an independent and assertive justice system is particularly important", and "a reliable legal framework and equal treatment of domestic and foreign investors is the basis for deeper cooperation".

Thus Zelenskyy's programme is largely defined for him; he has to significantly improve the infrastructure for Western investments. If he is to carry out his mission and secure investment, Ukraine's place in the international division of labour is already clear: as another semi-colonial, low-wage country in Germany and the EU's chain of workshops in Eastern Europe. That is the only capitalist perspective for Ukraine.

The German bourgeoisie is also concerned whether the two-thirds majorities necessary for such constitutional changes can be found in the Rada. SPIEGEL online also wants to test "Zelenskyy with his promises of reform" by his attitude to its house oligarch Kolomoyskyj from Dnepropetrovsk.

Rumours are also leaking out that the now superfluous deputies of the deselected parties have long since settled in the new Sluha Narodu party and continue to draw their salaries from various oligarchies. The old system is tough and resistant and is not willing to be simply voted out as long as the interests that support it are still alive.

In Russia, the election in Ukraine has received a lot of attention. On election day, Russian state television reported live throughout the day. The state-backed commentators made Russia's interest clear: Moscow is ready for talks with Zelenskyy. Apart from the Crimea, whose integration is of central strategic importance for Russia, all topics could be discussed. It is conceivable that the war in Donbas could be ended, if the West lifted the sanctions against Russia.

Perspective

Even the Ukrainian working class will soon lose its illusions in the West. The leading countries of Western imperialism can only maintain their profit rates if they integrate semicolonial countries and regions further and further into their production chains. The only yardstick is cheaper production.

Even if investments do come to Ukraine, a look at Bulgaria and Romania shows what kind of future they will bring with them. All the promised reforms and the fight against corruption, which are praised and preached to the people as the Western cure for their miserable existence, really only express the interests of international capital and the Ukrainian elites. It is all about optimising the exploitation of these countries for the imperialist powers and a corrupt national elite and their integration into the geostrategic struggle for the redivision of the world.

Today, the working class must prepare and arm itself against this by its collective struggle against the cuts in wages, pensions and health care, against increases in energy costs and rents, for the nationalisation of monopolies, banks and energy supplies under workers' control, against any privatisations, against armament and for self-defence against fascist attacks.

A decisive question will be the struggle against any further mobilisation for the war against the East of Ukraine, as well as against the dominance of Russian imperialism in Donbas. This of course requires a break with all bourgeois forces, not only with Zelenskyy and the pro-Western parties, but also with the pro-Russian "opposition". Only on this basis will it be possible to build a revolutionary workers' party in Ukraine

and overcome the political crisis of the class.

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Links:

[1] <https://sluga-narodu.com/program>