Will Ukraine’s new parliament speed up reforms?

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The eighth Ukrainian parliament will be pro-Ukrainian, pro-European and hopefully pro-reform. Following the departure of Viktor Yanukovych from power in February, early parliamentary elections were one of the central demands of the Euromaidan protestors (presidential elections were held in May) as a necessary step towards genuine political change in the country. While the victory of President Petro Poroshenko’s bloc was long predicted, the election results are surprising in many respects. For instance, the Popular Front party led by Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk and speaker of the parliament Oleksandr Turchynov came first.

The turnout of 52.4 per cent was lower than in the three previous parliamentary elections in Ukraine. This is largely due to Russia’s military intervention into large parts of Donbas. While Crimea is entirely annexed by Russia, elections did not take place in 9 out of 21 electoral districts in the Donetsk region (roughly covering 49 per cent of voters in the region) and 6 out of 11 in the Luhansk region (approximately 69 per cent). But in a number of Donbas districts where the elections were held, many ballot stations did not open due to a lack of security.

As a result, Ukraine’s new parliament – half of which (225 members) is elected through closed party lists in a single nationwide constituency, and another half through first-past-the-post contests in single-mandate constituencies – will have 27 fewer members than the constitution allows. But this should not affect the authority of the parliament: according to the constitution, it can act if at least two thirds of 450 members are elected. The electoral campaign was marred by irregularities, such as attempts to buy votes, secretive campaign financing and a few cases of harassment of candidates. But these irregularities were less numerous and far less significant in terms of impact on the results than in the 2012 elections, according to non-governmental election watchdogs.
Despite the lack of promised reforms since the Euromaidan protests earlier this year, Ukrainians have largely extended their trust in President Poroshenko and Prime Minister Yatsenyuk. Their corresponding political parties – Poroshenko Bloc and Popular Front – received almost the same result: 21.7 and 22 per cent respectively, according to preliminary election results. Though it scored less than predicted in pre-election surveys, the Poroshenko Bloc will have the largest party faction in the parliament as it is also likely to win a plurality (over 60 seats) in the single-mandate constituencies. Popular Front’s electoral campaign equated voting for the party with voting to keep Arseniy Yatsenyuk as prime minister. Given the victory of his party in the proportional representation system, Yatsenyuk is very likely to stay on as prime minister.

The party which unexpectedly won third place is Samopomich (‘Self-Help’). This result is truly amazing considering that this party was established by Lviv mayor Andriy Sadovyi at the end of 2012, and first competed in elections for the Kyiv city council in May this year winning 6 per cent of the vote. In the parliamentary campaign, it managed to grow from 1.2 per cent in September opinion polls to 11 per cent in the election one month later. The difference with other Ukrainian parties, which are strongly leader-oriented, is that Sadovyi is only number 50 on his party’s national list, and declared no intention of becoming a member of parliament at the beginning of the campaign. Samopomich’s list is largely composed of civil society activists, local government representatives and small and medium businessmen, which shows that some Ukrainians clearly seek a new type of political elite.

Other parties entering parliament are the Opposition Bloc (9 per cent) which Yanukovych’s former party members have constituted, the populist Radical party of Oleh Liashko (7 per cent), and Yulia Tymoshenko’s Motherland party (just above the 5 per cent threshold), whereas the nationalist Svoboda party did not make it. For the first time in Ukraine’s recent history the Communists are out of the parliament, having failed to pass the 5 per cent minimum threshold. Putin’s ‘fascist’ bogeymen, the Right Sector, have not made it to parliament either, though its leader won in the single-mandate constituency in one of the Dnipropetrovsk (his home region) districts.

The composition of the new parliament should enable a strong pro-European majority to carry out promised reforms. These include the fight against corruption, reform of the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, public administration reform and decentralisation, tax reform and business deregulation. All these reforms have been promised by President Poroshenko and strongly demanded by Ukrainian society. Public pressure, also reinforced by civil society activists and journalists within the parliament, will be strong, but trust in the new government will not last for long.

This is partly because the new parliament will also host several dozens of members who have been associated with corruption and the previous regime. Some are gathered in the Opposition Bloc, but some have been elected to the parliament masked as independent deputies, and a few were candidates from Poroshenko’s Bloc too. The shadow of oligarchs is behind almost all parties in the parliament, and some oligarchs have been elected. The old guard will be the main ‘brake-pushers’ of the reform process. Put simply, political corruption and the power of oligarchy in Ukraine will persist, unless a new electoral system based on proportional representation and open party lists combined with new legislation on transparent party and campaign financing are introduced.

The ‘gear-shifters’ of the reform process – civil society activists who are present in each party list of the main pro-European parties – are not many, but the hope that they will bring a wind of change to Ukraine’s politics is high. They are seen to be the pioneers of reform, and should serve as internal watchdogs and ensure a true link with the society. Whereas the country has made another step towards Europe and deeper political reforms, its challenges, including the war with Russia, are also growing. Ukraine does not have much time to start changing itself, and the costs of not reforming could become toxic for its statehood.