

Political Squabbles Hamper Ukraine

Infighting, which has stalled reform, expected to continue after vote

by Geoffrey York, *Globe and Mail*
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After a failed attempt to delay Ukraine's parliamentary election, President Leonid Kuchma is facing the prospect of an even more hostile and left-leaning parliament.

The result of the March vote, analysts say, will be a continuation of the bitter political infighting that has stalled reforms and kept Ukrainians mired in one of Europe's poorest economies.

"Optimists say the new parliament couldn't be worse than the current one, but I'm not sure," said Markian Bilynski, director of a democracy institute in Kyiv. "There's a lot of disenchantment with politics. A lot of demagogues could be elected."

The campaigning has already begun. Dozens of parties are trying to gather the 200,000 signatures necessary to qualify for the election ballot. Most are campaigning against Mr. Kuchma, trying to exploit the wide-spread discontent with Ukraine's mounting economic crisis of unpaid wages, massive debts, industrial stagnation and energy shortages.

Mr. Kuchma, elected in 1994 on a reformist platform, has been criticized for political weakness after he failed to push his reforms through the balky parliament. This year he made several unsuccessful attempts to persuade parliament to postpone the March election, predicting that the vote would "break society into pieces" at a time when parliament should be passing laws to salvage the economy.

Two left-wing parties, the Communists and Socialists, and a Ukrainian nationalist party, Rukh, are expected to perform strongly in the election; opinion polls show that both Rukh and the Communists are supported by about 18 per cent of Ukrainians. Their strength in parliament will be magnified by new election rules, which will allocate half the 450 seats to parties gaining more than 4 per cent of the vote.

Depending on the size of their gains, Mr. Kuchma could find himself pushed out of power as early as next year, forcing a presidential election before the scheduled date in 1999.

The centrists, including a small number of pro-government parties, are badly fragmented. The 10 leading centrist parties have a combined total of 23 per cent support in the latest poll. Most are unlikely to reach the 4 per cent threshold and could disappear if they fail to unite in an electoral coalition.

Mr. Kuchma appears to be supporting a centrist party, the People's Democratic Party, headed by his Prime Minister, Valeriy

Pustovoitenko. The party is well financed, but shows little sign of gaining popularity.

Polls have found that about 40 per cent of Ukrainians disapprove of Mr. Kuchma's performance, while less than 30 per cent approve.

Two former prime ministers, Pavlo Lazarenko and Yevhen Marchuk, have added to Mr. Kuchma's troubles by creating their own parties. Both are gearing up to challenge Mr. Kuchma in the next presidential election. The wily Socialist leader and parliamentary chairman, Olexander Moroz, is seen as another strong challenger for the presidency.

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The political bickering and stalled reforms have produced a widespread sense of cynicism. Two-thirds of Ukrainians say they have no influence over decisions in their country. Only 10 per cent believe that Ukraine has any political leaders with the ability to manage the country effectively. And almost one-third say they would vote for the highest bidder - whoever offers them the most cash.

Yet despite the grumbling, most Ukrainians say they are likely to vote in the election.

In many ways, Ukraine is more democratic than Russia and other former Soviet republics. Unlike Russia, it has already gone through a democratic transition of power (in 1994 when Mr. Kuchma was elected). Its

parliament is generally reflective of public opinion, and - unlike the Russian parliament - it has significant influence over government decisions.

Analysts say the new election rules will produce a parliament with a stronger party structure, greater discipline, fewer vote-switching independents and more accountability to the voters.

In the current parliament, barely a third of the deputies are members of any political party. Of the past seven prime ministers, only one belonged to a party.

Voting in parliament is unpredictable. Some deputies change their votes from day to day on the same issue. It is widely believed that some deputies sell their votes to business interests.

As a result, basic reforms such as privatization have bogged down in parliament. A crucial new civil code is still stuck at the early stages of parliamentary review after many months of delays, despite general support for it by most deputies.

"It's a quagmire where everyone and no one is responsible," said Bohdan Kravchenko, vice-rector of the Ukrainian Academy of Public Administration. "You have politics by intrigue. Commercial lobbies buy votes. It's not even clear which factions in parliament support the government."

The delayed reforms have left Ukraine with one of the weakest economies in Europe. The economy is expected to decline again this year, for the sixth consecutive year.

References For the Record

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