Kharkiv, Ukraine. Opposition Platform campaign billboard for the 21 July 2019 Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine election. (Shutterstock)

Six Reasons the "Opposition Platform" Won in Eastern Ukraine

By Olena Lennon

At a large precinct in a regional city of Zaporizhya in eastern Ukraine—where I was an international election observer during the last parliamentary election on July 21—vote counting proceeded well into the night. A room full of exhausted Precinct Election Commission (PEC) members, as well as domestic and international observers, seemed under the spell of a monotonous repetition of "shest, shest, shest" ("six" in Russian)—a PEC member was announcing the winner of each individual ballot as she moved it from one big unsorted pile into respective "party" piles. Number six was the number assigned to the "Opposition Platform—For Life" party, led by oligarch Yuriy Boyko. Known for its pro-Russian alignment, the party was founded in 2018 after

it split from "Opposition Block," formed in 2014 by six parties that opposed the Maidan Revolution.

The outcome of the nationwide election was rather predictable: President Zelenskyy's party "The Servant of the People" gained a majority in the new Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's Parliament) by winning in all but three regions of Ukraine—Donetsk, Luhansk, and Lviv. It was also fully expected that the "Opposition Platform—For Life" would meet the threshold of 5 percent to gain seats in the Rada, but less expected was the scale of its victory—the party finished second nation-wide, and first in eastern Ukraine. Thus, in Donetsk region, 43.41 percent voted for the "Opposition Platform"

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Kyiv, Ukraine (April, 2019). Ukrainian presidential candidate Volodymyr Zelenskyy greets his supporters after debate at Olympiysky Stadium with Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko (Shutterstock)

and only 27.19 percent for "The Servant of the People."[1] Luhansk region closely matched that result with 49.83 percent in favor of the pro-Russian "Opposition Platform" and 28.83 percent for "The Servant of the People," respectively. In Lviv, popstar's Slava Vakarchuk's party "Holos" emerged victorious.

When I returned to the U.S. from my observation mission, almost everyone asked me a variation of the same question: "Why did regions most affected by the war elect a party that aligns itself with the aggressor?" Here is my six-fold answer to that.

War Party vs Peace Party

In the months leading up to the election, Russia's sophisticated propaganda machine had presented political choices available to voters as a mutually exclusive binary: the war party versus the peace party. The "war party" was former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko's party "European Solidarity" and, by extension, other so-called Euro-optimists. The "peace party" was Yuriy Boyko's "Opposition Platform."

To reinforce the "peace party" image, prior to the parliamentary election, leaders of the "Opposition Platform" Viktor Medvedchuk and Yuriy Boyko visited Moscow on more than one occasion to meet with Russian Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev and Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller to restore "normal economic cooperation," as well as "peace and the settlement of current problems"[2] in Ukraine. While restoring peace in the Donbas region was a top campaign pledge for Zelenskyy as well, his promises seemed backed only by the ubiquitous V-shaped peace sign gesture that he came to embrace as his trademark. Compare that with images of Medvedchuk and Boyko sitting at the negotiating table with high-level Russian officials. These images proliferated in various media channels, further solidifying voters' perception of the "Opposition Platform" as the only serious "peace party" that had exclusive access to President Putin's circles.

Negotiating with an aggressor did not seem to bother a population ready to believe in "peace by any

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means." A taxi driver in a town of Kostyantynivka, near the front line, told me he voted for the "Opposition Platform" because "we won't win war with war." An Afghan war veteran, he rejected many offers to join the Russian "separatist" ranks at the outset of the war in 2014. As a taxi driver near the war zone, he comes in daily contact with a population most traumatized by war as they cross the line between government–and nongovernment–controlled areas. While he recognizes Russia's direct role in sustaining the conflict, he believes only negotiations with Russia can bring an end to the war, hence a vote for the "Opposition Platform." Clearly, the party skillfully exploited Ukrainian people's fatigue of war and appealed to their baseline emotions by the promise of "ending the war by any means," while at the same time reinforcing the image of Euro-optimists as warmongers.

Vote Buying

While OSCE International Election Observation Mission declared the last parliamentary elections in Ukraine as "transparent and well organized with a high level of adherence to established procedures,"[3] many instances of vote buying were recorded, particularly in districts close to the frontline, the so-called grey zones. For example in District 51, which is near occupied Horlivka in Donetsk region and the closest polling station to the line of contact, witnesses reported seeing representatives of candidate Oleksandr Kovalyov, who ran as an independent, single-member district candidate, going from house to house and offering the equivalent of $100 for a vote.[4] In addition, Kovalyov had reportedly organized buses to transport people from occupied territories to nearest government-controlled polling stations.

In the end, Kovalyov earned enough trust with his constituents (district residents and non-residents alike) to secure a win. What is unclear is how many of Kovalyov's supporters knew that in 2016 he faced criminal charges for collaborating with former president Yanukovych's Berkut police that allegedly opened fire at the Maidan protesters in 2014. The investigation stalled, and, five years later, instead of going to jail, Kovalyov is going to the Verkhovna Rada as a democratically elected representative.

The neighboring District 50 had its own share of drama: protestors gathered outside a polling station preventing members of the election commission from finishing their count of the ballots. The protesters claimed that the vote counting was being falsified in favor of the "Opposition Platform's" candidate, Ruslan Trebushkin, who was running for the district's single-member seat in the Rada.[5] The situation escalated and led to the dispatch of special forces and temporary "hold" on vote counting. Allegations of vote rigging led to a court ordering the District 50 election commission to recount votes.[6] The district's commission failed to comply with the order and, as a result, the Central Election Commission in Kyiv stripped the district commission of its powers and ordered that the ballots be transferred to Kyiv for recount. However, the ballots were in the district's possession at least twelve days before they were transported to Kyiv. Based on local election observers' witness accounts, when the ballots arrived in Kyiv, as many as three hundred were damaged and, as a result, disqualified.[7] In the end, Russia-friendly Trebushkin seized a narrow win (by only 206 votes) over Andriy Aksyonov, who ran as an independent. The developments in electoral districts 50 and 51 were symptomatic of how the "Opposition Platform" found success in other areas of eastern Ukraine.

Media Control

Ukrainian media remains largely controlled by powerful oligarchs. In 2016, *Ukrainska Pravda* reported that approximately 75 percent of the domestic media landscape was owned by four oligarchs: Viktor Pinchuk, Ihor Kolomoyskyy, Dmytro Firtash and Rinat Akhmetov. All four are billionaires with deep connections to the Kremlin and previous Ukrainian presidents, including Maidan-ousted Viktor Yanukovych. All four have portfolios spanning from oil to media, and all four face serious and credible allegations of corruption.

When I asked a man who lives in an occupied territory of Donbas about the news sources he used the most, he reassured me that they were all "pro-Ukrainian." When I asked him to name some, he listed three TV channels: "NewsOne," "Channel 112," and "Inter." According to a Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) sociological survey, those three channels are in the top ten most popular channels in Ukraine (not only in occupied territories): "Inter" ranked third behind channels "1+1" and "Ukraina," "Channel 112" ranked sixth, and "NewsOne" was eighth.[8] Just how "pro-Ukrainian" are these channels? "NewsOne" and "Channel 112" are owned by one of the "Opposition Platform's" leaders—Viktor Medvedchuk, the Kremlin's most loyal ally and mouthpiece in Ukraine. Medvedchuk does not hide his close ties with President Putin: in 2004, Putin became godfather to Medvedchuk's daughter, Daria. Medvedchuk also owns 80 percent of TV Channel "Inter." Serhiy Lyovochkin, another oligarch belonging to the "Opposition Platform," owns the remaining 20 percent of "Inter's" shares.[9] It shouldn't be a surprise to anyone then that during the campaign these "pro-Ukrainian" channels

depicted the "Opposition Platform" as the only viable solution to securing Ukraine's peace and economic prosperity.

In October 2017, Ukraine passed a law requiring national and regional TV channels to produce at least 75 percent of content in the Ukrainian language; for local channels the quota was 60 percent.[10] The law was not enforced until a year later, October 2018, and according to law compliance reports,[11] "opposition" channels owned by pro-Russia oligarchs fully met the Ukrainian content quota. Thus, it is likely that the channels were popular not because of their use of the Russian language, but because they offered wider programming options, particularly in entertainment. When it came to political content, it is possible that viewers self-selected channels that reinforced opinions and positions they already supported.

Promises of Social Protection

Many residents of non-government controlled areas of Ukraine are registered as internally displaced individuals and frequently travel across the line of contact to see their families or take care of basic business. While Kyiv recently restored payment of pensions to residents of occupied territories (after suspending them in 2015), many people continue to feel insecure about the Ukrainian government's support. By contrast, Russia-backed "republics" have been paying pensions to residents of occupied territories with little documentation required. According to some witness reports, the DNR even introduced financial assistance for residents from Donbas territories "temporarily occupied by Ukraine." To reinforce the perception of protection,

three days after Volodymyr Zelenskyy's landslide victory in Ukraine's presidential elections, President Putin signed a decree that would fast-track Russian passport applications for residents of occupied territories; he later announced that the procedure could be extended to all citizens of Ukraine, not just those living in self-proclaimed "republics."[12] Despite an outcry of condemnation from both Ukrainian and international officials, many residents of Donbas rushed to take advantage of the procedure in order to be eligible for Russian social welfare payments. However, it is unclear whether Russia's offer of support for Donbas residents is a short-term tactic or long-term commitment.

Voter Turnout and Generational Gap

The 49.84 percent voter turnout in Ukraine's last parliamentary election, while low, was actually consistent with previous parliamentary elections in Ukraine. Moreover, it was similar to the turnout in the last snap parliamentary election in 2014, following a government overhaul brought about by the Maidan Revolution. However, it is not so much the *number* of voters that is noteworthy, as the average voter age. My personal observations, combined with feedback from other observers and local election staff, revealed a fairly consistent pattern: polling stations on July 21 were filled with mostly the elderly. It is highly plausible that the "Opposition Platform's" victory in eastern Ukraine might in fact have been correlated with the average voter age. According to exit polls, while age was not a factor in "The Servant of the People's" popularity (the party won in all age brackets) when it came to the "Opposition Platform," age did seem to play a role. Thus, among 18-49 year olds, less than 5 percent voted for the pro-Russian "Opposition Platform."[13] In contrast, four times as

many 60+ year olds did—20 percent. What these statistics may suggest is that had younger voters showed up at the ballot box in significantly greater numbers, the outcome of the election could have been different and the "Opposition Platform" might have missed the 5 percent threshold required to enter the Verkhovna Rada.

What can explain the low turnout on the part of younger voters in Ukraine? In addition to the fact that younger voters are universally less politically engaged than their older counterparts, in the context of the last parliamentary election in Ukraine, the turnout might have also been affected by the timing of the snap election. Not only is July a popular vacation time in Ukraine, but a hot summer weekend, in and of itself, might have made traveling to a polling station a less than appealing proposition. It is possible that had elections been held in late October, as scheduled, we would have seen a higher turnout of younger voters, and possibly a lower level of support for the "Opposition Platform."

Early elections were beneficial not only for Zelenskyy who needed a like-minded parliament to implement his agenda, but arguably for the "Opposition Platform" as well, as the party would have been able to exploit the mobilization of their electorate in the presidential election. "Opposition Platform's" Yuriy Boyko fared rather well in the first presidential round: he finished fourth nationwide with 11.67 percent of votes (less than 2 percent behind Yuliya Tymoshenko who finished third, and only about 4 percent points away from the first runner-up, Petro Poroshenko, who advanced into the second round of elections).[14] More impressively, Boyko was the top winner in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Holding parliamentary elections

as early as possible seemed in the interest of not only "The Servant of the People" but the "Opposition Platform" as well, considering the gains both parties had made in mobilizing the base during the presidential election.

The convoluted nature of a mixed-system parliamentary election might have also deterred nascent voters ignorant about the process. With 22 parties and more than 3,000 candidates in the running, both from party lists and majoritarian districts, a voter was expected to navigate a rather wide and complex political field. Compounding the issue is the leader-centric political culture in Ukraine: perceptions of leaders as messiahs continue to dominate in people's psyche and popular narratives. As a result, voters are more likely to get energized for presidential elections than they are for parliamentary elections. Ironically, in semi-presidential democracies, such as Ukraine, parliamentary elections actually play a more significant role than presidential elections, as legislators have numerous instruments at their disposal to check the executive power concentrated in a single individual or a single party. Ukrainians should thus approach voting in parliamentary elections more responsibly, as their votes may in fact directly translate into the quality of representatives they send to the Rada to serve as a check on the executive branch.

Lastly, low voter turnout could also be explained by simple election fatigue. Even the originally scheduled election date at the end of October would have been strenuous on a population subjected to both presidential and parliamentary elections in the same year. With snap parliamentary elections scheduled less than four months after the second round of the presidential election, voters'

attention span and enthusiasm might have naturally dwindled, especially if they were disappointed with the results of the presidential election in the first place. "My vote is not going to decide anything" and "I am against everyone" were the two most common explanations I had heard from people who did not vote. One would think 22 parties would provide people with a sufficient range of choices and yet — voter apathy was rife. Clearly, lack of trust in the political system trumped positive democratic dynamics, such as political pluralism, freedom of speech, and accessibility of elections.

Protest Vote Holds

The last presidential elections in Ukraine can be interpreted as a protest vote against Petro Poroshenko rather than one in favor of Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Similarly, many supporters of the "Opposition Platform" seemed to have been motivated to vote in parliamentary elections as another opportunity to communicate their disdain for former president Poroshenko. The image of Poroshenko as the root cause of all Ukraine's problems had registered prominently in people's psyche: he had allegedly mismanaged the war, mismanaged the economy, and exacerbated social divisions. Following that "logic," some voters had determined that the only effective antidote to Poroshenko was a party that could restore relations with Russia, thereby ending the war, improving the economy, and pacifying Russian speakers.

Many people with whom I spoke reported feeling betrayed by Poroshenko. Many had lost their businesses, houses, and family members in occupied territories, but they were still expected to

move on with their lives. Meanwhile, Poroshenko, as rich as he already was, failed to rise to the occasion and make a seemingly minor sacrifice—close his Roshen chocolate factory in Lipetsk, Russia and accept a relatively minor loss in exchange for unity with his country.[15] Poroshenko did eventually close his Lipetsk factory in April 2017, almost three years after the inception of the war. At that point, it was too little too late. As one Donbas official—who had lost three businesses and a house in occupied Horlivka—told me, he felt personally betrayed by Poroshenko. "Let it go, show that you stand together with your people and with your nation. You don't need it [a factory in Russia]!"—he exclaimed lighting up another cigarette.

Conclusion

People's overwhelming support for the "Opposition Platform" in eastern Ukraine was a function of numerous variables, but the most important of them was undoubtedly media's manipulative propaganda and exploitation of war fatigue to promote the "peace by any means" doctrine. It is also apparent that economic drivers of voting behavior overpowered ideology, and in the east "trade with Russia" resonated prominently as a proxy for economic and social improvement.

The success of the "Opposition Platform" this past summer was limited to the region most adversely affected by the war with Russia, and likewise most susceptible to influence from Russian and Russian-aligned sources. Systemic gaps in Ukraine's ability to secure elections on government-controlled territories are further testament to the near impossibility of holding fair elections in the occupied region of Donbas as proposed by the new peace agreement, known as the "Steinmeier formula."

Until Ukraine regains control of its international border with Russia and is able to provide a secure environment in the occupied territories for candidates, voters and election observers, the validity of any election in those areas will be gravely compromised. In the meantime, a great start would be for Kyiv to work more rigorously on securing all future elections on government-controlled territories. That great start has already begun: Ukraine's parliament lifted prosecutorial immunity on all parliament members on September 3. Now the government has the power to investigate even sitting members of parliament, like Medvedchuk and Boyko, if there is sufficient evidence.

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the authors.

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