

## Political Participation in Ukraine: Specifics in the Main Aspects

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### ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of political participation in Ukraine is studied with a reference to the phenomena of neopatrimonialism and political clientelism. This article is focused on the four main aspects of political participation: party affiliation, electoral behavior, political activity, and party leadership. The author argues that Ukrainian political parties represent the patron client system, in which the property issues play the decisive role, while ideologies are used as instrumental tools during the political campaigns.

**Keywords:** political participation, political parties, political process, political elites, political leadership, party affiliation, electoral behavior, political activity.

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**Introduction.** Western political scientists, in general, estimate the modern history of Ukraine in the paradigm of transition, where political parties are regarded mainly as agents of democratization. According to this concept, their mission is to provide post Communist transition from the authoritarian regime to democracy and insure further democratic consolidation. Special attention is paid to the ‘Orange Revolution’ and ‘Euromaidan’, which are considered by the great majority of Western authors as turning points on Ukraine’s way to democracy and off with Russia (McFaul, 2007; Kubicek, 2009; Diuk, 2014; Wilson, 2014; Marples and Mills, 2015; Kuzio, 2016; Terzyan, 2020). The weakness of political participation is usually regarded as one of the main obstacles on this way: “While it is true that Ukraine does possess an electoral democracy, democratic consolidation remains elusive and is susceptible to a variety of problems. These include a weak civil society and weak political parties, regional divisions, unstable political institutions and a lack of the rule of law” (Kubicek, 2001: 117).

In post-Soviet and comparative studies Ukraine, in accordance with the theory of democracy, is considered as a hybrid regime with ‘democratic’ and ‘pro European’ parties playing as actors of positive changes through the liberal reforms (Diamond, 2002; Cleary, 2016). Special attention was paid to the impact of European integration on politics in Ukraine (Wolczuk, 2009), the Ukrainian crisis from the perspective of Western grand strategy (Petro, 2019), and the evolution of Ukraine’s foreign policy (Zhiltsov, 2020).

The conflict with Russia, grew up to the full scale war, put Ukraine into the focus. However, many important factors, especially those of the Ukrainian politics and its modern history, are still poorly known to foreign observers. Meanwhile, the development of Ukraine's political system after the collapse of the USSR and the evolution of its political institutes played very important role in creating prerequisites for this war. Political participation of the Ukrainian citizens, directed by political parties, is one the key issues in this context.

The processes of the post Soviet transformation led to the establishment of the neopatrimonial modes (Ukraine is a bright, but not unique example), in which political participation is formed on a "patron client" chart, and political parties act as public facades of patron client networks (Fisun, 2004). Basis of the Ukrainian post Soviet political class is to a great extent made up by the "party of power" the unformal corporation of the "state management elite" (Bilous, 2003). Members of this "party of power" had not a single ideology, but shared some common values, ethics, patterns of social behavior, that later appeared in the wide set of political organizations. Ukraine's political parties gradually developed as patron client systems (Bielashko, 2009, 2010, 2015). This evolution, in general, was finished in the first half of 2000s. So, the examined phenomenon can be observed in its structural and functional complexity in the period of about twenty years long enough to make certain consequences.

The purpose of this article is to present the specifics of political participation in Ukraine, analyzing four main aspects of the phenomenon: party affiliation, electoral behavior, political activity, party leadership. It should be mentioned, that described below peculiarities are products of the Ukrainian society evolution not only in the post-Soviet period, but in the Soviet and pre Soviet ones as well.

### **Party affiliation**

Ukrainian parties develop and function as neopatrimonial systems. Thus, political participation in the form of party affiliation is considered by significant part of their members (including leaders) primarily as opportunities to get an access to some resources and a better place in the social hierarchy. They get such access either directly (government appointments, career opportunities, chance to manage state or municipal property, jobs in party offices, payments for campaigning etc.) or indirectly through general increasing of political, and, accordingly, social and economic, influence. At the same time, each of the main Ukrainian political forces builds its own dichotomy "we they", trying to impose their vision for the voters. Thus, political parties are becoming a major factor, determining the structure of Ukrainian society and the identities of the citizens of Ukraine.

The political parties determine the parameters of public discourse, formulate and broadcast the principles of social life, thus forming the new social reality. A person perceives and interprets information according to the structure of his her psychological space. The closer this information to the structure of psychological values of the subject, the larger and stronger its importance and influence. So, various technologies of mass manipulation play extremely important role, concerning the influence of the powerful Ukrainian parties on their voters.

In the post Soviet countries parties desire above all to establish their control over the mass communications, functioning on the principles of unilateral informing and manipulating the citizens

according to the owners' needs. So, each change at the Power Olympus entails certain transformations in the system of mass communications. A political force, occupying leading positions, tries to use economic and judicial leverage (and sometimes physical pressure as well) to put communication channels under its own control. With each change of the president, the rules of "the media game", including thematic priorities and events estimation system, are changed, the new "information verticals" are constructed. With the expansion of the base for the national skepticism, the mutual exclusion of society and political class is growing on the one hand, and opportunities for social manipulation on the other (Fishman, 2003). This makes strong negative impact on the formation of stable mass culture of inter group communication. And political parties, reducing the level of feedback from their constituents, play a significant role in these processes.

In Ukraine both ruling and opposition parties are quite closed organizations (term "corporations" sometimes even more appropriate) that actually do not need ideology as an instrument for internal consolidation. In the majority of Ukraine's parties ideologies serve for external purposes to allure voters, to look respectfully in front of foreign partners etc. Public activities developed just as much as dictated by external necessity. A specific type of party system has been formed in Ukraine, in which "the cadre type parties prevail, that do not suggest ideological homogeneity and do not account the need for continued work with voters" (Podgorna, 2001). Accordingly, party staff is becoming more compact and professional, its traditional functions in different spheres (human resource management, media, advertising, public relations, event management, research and analysis etc.) are largely performed by outsource agencies.

In terms of the immature nonconsolidated democracy party ranks are often just the means of realization of selfish interests and ambitions of their leaders, who use different sorts of propaganda and manipulation techniques. It is not exaggeration to state that ordinary members and supporters of Ukrainian parties are affiliated mainly with myths cultivated by the leaders and the leaders themselves, not with ideological platforms or political programs. Some of the myths are very ancient, others are constructed recently, but all of them are originated from deep cultural stereotypes, enrooted in mentalities of different social and ethnic groups (Campbell, 2004).

Ukrainian party leaders and high rank activists direct their political participation largely (some of them exclusively) to comfortably fit into existing neopatrimonial system, becoming a client of the most influential patron (ideally the head of state), get maximal possible resources to satisfy their own ambitions and ensure the loyalty of their own clients, whose circle is often does not coincide with membership in the relevant party.

In Ukraine a long time there were no rigid barriers between the ruling and opposition elites. In fact, very often the goal of political activity of an opposition politician was not to change the ruling party, but to integrate with it, get his/her own piece of government. On the other hand, formal membership in the ruling camp does not always mean access to public resources. All this determined the absence of clear dividing lines in Ukrainian politics. Politicians, groups, regional organizations and even entire parties moved from one political camp to another, creating situational, sometimes very unexpected, coalitions, changed the patrons, depending on the conjuncture. Gradually the distinction between government and

opposition has become clearer, but some flexibility is preserved to this day. To a large extent this contributes to the fact that the most powerful patron client systems have interparty or supra party character, enhancing politicians that formally belong to different parties to expand the shadow influence in politics.

### **Electoral behavior**

The democratic principle of government turnover assumes, that citizens can fire the politicians, who do not cope with their duties, and their place should take another group of political elite, recruited via parties. Political parties present their platforms as ideologies and thus establish the link between contenders for power and their voters (Hinich & Munger, 1994). Today sophistication of voter means not the ability to find and get some politically important information, but the capacity to choose at least some essence from the great amount of information concerned with politics. Voting in low information contests poses a real challenge even for rather sophisticated American voters (Dalton, 2006, p. 41). In Ukraine the lack of political culture and the deficit of politically important information is a constant problem for many years. Political elites aggravate this problem spamming citizens with non-sense talk shows, false experts and unbridled propaganda in the toughly controlled media.

The programs of Ukrainian parties are often purely formal documents. They “do not provide the responsibility to voters or even party members for their implementation. Election programs of parties are mainly opportunistic in nature and not intended for long-term and hard work on their performance” (Zhdanov & Yakymenko, 2003, p. 6). Ukrainian parties are constantly changing their programmes, adapting them to the voters’ moods, sentiments and expectations, trying to find the most effective formula of influence. Obviously, the number of successful (represented in power bodies) parties responds to the number of such formulas, not to the ideological platforms, that are very similar and now are tending to “patriotic” and “pro West” standardization.

The majority of Ukrainian voters vote not for the party programs, but for their own stereotypes and charismatic public persons able to play effectively on these stereotypes. During the election campaigns, that took place in Ukraine in the last thirty years, ideological maneuvers of the parties for the expansion of the social base did not bring them expected results. At the same time, parties that refused from serious economic and social programs, using a mix of attractive features of leader’s personal image with “patriotic”, “democratic”, “left”, “traditional”, “liberal”, “peace” or “justice” slogans instead of ideology, achieved significant successes. The main components of the parties’ election success were the effective organizational structure, combining professionals and activists (usually paid as well), and media recourses (party press, legal and shadow advertising, loyal TV and radio channels etc.). But in the last decade election campaigns reduced to advertising and manipulating with the constantly growing role of the new and social media.

Participation in campaigns is an extension of electoral behavior beyond the act of voting. This mode includes working for a party or a candidate (agitators, members of the electoral commissions, observers at the polling stations etc.), attending campaign events and other activities connected with the election process. Fewer people are routinely active in campaigns because this mode is more demanding than merely casting a vote. Campaign work requires more initiative and stronger motivation, and there is

greater need to coordinate participation with others. Along with the additional effort, however, campaign activity can offer more political influence to the individual citizen and convey more information than voting. Campaign work is important to parties and candidates, and candidates generally are more sensitive to, and aware of, the policy interests of their activists (Verba & Nie, 1972, pp. 17-19).

In Ukraine the autonomous political participation of the party leaders and top activists (politically affiliated business owners, state and municipal officials, public managers, priests and others with social levers of some kind) is largely intended to put under their control the participation of the maximum possible number of voters, thus making it manipulative and often mobilized.

### **Political activity**

In consolidated democracies the frameworks of parties' ideological evolution are quite narrow. In political systems, arisen due to the transformation of the communist regimes and the emergence of new states, such framework is much broader, but not limitless. Organizational specificity of political parties is a balance of collective and selective motivations. The need to maintain this balance (otherwise the party loses its activists, such examples are not rare) limits the leaders' maneuvers in the sphere of ideology as well as in the choice of political strategy and coalition partners.

In Ukraine the first political parties appeared during the total social crisis and were far ahead of the psychological readiness of the citizens for the dramatic post-Soviet transformation (Wilson & Yakushik, 1992). People, for many years existed in terms of one-party monopoly, could not immediately acquire the habits of the "civilized politics", such as multiparty competition, free and fair election, rational political participation, civil control over the government. Therefore, the formation and development of Ukraine's party system was largely dependent on the conscious efforts of elite groups, determined by their own narrow interests, that did not coincide with and sometimes even contradicted to the popular needs.

An important factor of political activity is the density of social networks in which citizens interact. Social networks influence the behavior of their members, generate symbolic and cultural norms and standards, set the amount of information required and available for decision making. The denser social network is, the more homogeneous is political participation of the individuals belonging to it. In Ukraine people interact in dense social networks, and they have little or no need for ideology. This phenomenon has a significant impact on determining the format of political activity. The "neighbors' opinion" affects political participation of an average citizen of Ukraine much more than the appeals of political parties. And the state propaganda plays the role of political ideologies.

Russell Dalton rightly argued: "The essence of grassroots democracy is represented in communal activity, which can take a wide variety of forms" (Dalton, 2006, p. 47). Communal activity often involves group efforts to deal with social or community problems, ranging from issues of schools or roads to protecting the local environment. In Ukraine local issues often were out of the focus of political activists, traditionally they were much more interested in something "global", like national revival, state building or civilization choice. In the last decade radical groups actively tried to fill this space using local issues to get publicity and new supporters, and some of them were rather successful.

Ukraine's local and regional elites rarely compete, coming from party principles, but often use party tools in the struggle for power, which means, first of all, the access to the distribution of public resources. That is why political parties and civil organizations can actively debate on any agenda in local councils and mass media, but the real decision making process, regarding the most important local and regional issues (budget, land, municipal contracts, building projects), often remains in the shadows. It is also a reason why local and regional leaders often try to limit their political activity beyond the official mainstream of the ruling party, even formally belonging to the opposition camp. On another hand, it is one more factor of the radicalization of political activists, that are not included in the process of the shadow decision making.

The Ukrainian social space is formed mainly by power relations, and economic situation often is affected by political activities, especially entailing changes in power structures. In fact, in Ukraine there is no political, social, legal and cultural environment necessary for the citizens' effective control over the government. That is why political participation often acquires unconventional forms. The most active, usually young, people, who are disagree with the existing game rules, look for opportunities to change the situation and find them in the radical patterns of political behavior. The trend to decide political contradictions not by arguments and compromises but by brutal force appeared in Ukrainian politics more than twenty years ago at the mass action "Ukraine without Kuchma!" started on December 15, 2000, and finished with attempts to storm the presidential administration on March 9, 2001 (Ukraine, 2017). Since that time political violence is gradually becoming more and more popular form of Ukrainians' political activity with growing scale and level of generated hatred.

### **Party leadership**

The problem of political, in particular party, leadership is especially important in the conditions of the post Soviet development in the unstructured societies with the low level of political culture and imperfect mechanisms of political participation.

In Ukraine party leadership is a status form of political participation. If an influential person has his/her own party, even "sofa" type (all members of the party can seat on one sofa), this is an additional, and important enough, attribute of power (and property as well), emphasizing political self sufficiency. Ambitious politicians often seek party leadership as an additional argument in the struggle for the high positions in the government, state corporations or local administrations.

The mentioned above density of social networks determine the patterns of political participation of party leaders as well as ordinary Ukrainians. Most of Ukrainian party leaders are not convinced adepts of this or that ideology, they just use certain ideas popular in targeted voter groups. For the great majority of them ideology is just a screen, behind which they hide their true interests.

Ukrainian party leaders direct their political activity largely (some of them exclusively) to comfortably build into existing neopatrimonial system, to achieve the attachment with a patron having the maximum influence (ideally the head of state, who is, since 2005, a leader in fact of his own party), to get some resources for provision of their own ambitions and the loyalty of their clients. It should

be mentioned, that the circle of clients usually rather randomly coincides with the ranks of the party headed of supported by the patron.

Within the framework of representative democracy relationship of a politician with his/her social community should be based on the rational calculation of gains and losses related to his/her professional activities (Gandhi, 2005). Adam Przeworski and John Sprague noted: “To think that the party leaders can grab any strategy to apply to any group with any program – is to reduce the study of parties and elections to an empty formalism” (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986, p. 120).

In Ukrainian realities charismatic leadership dominates, which implies a strong and stable emotional bond of the leader with the represented community. Rational arguments fade into background, politicians appeal mainly not only to the minds, but to the feelings of their constituents. As a result of this trend, “the parties formed under certain charismatic leaders, and subjective factors are coming first rather than national interest” (Baziv, 1998, p. 85).

Despite the fact that autonomous factions within the party often give many advantages, providing more flexibility, allowing to store critical tone, to restrain excessive ambitions, to make quick adjustments to the policy, the Ukrainian party leaders treat them as an intolerable evil. Moreover, it is a rule not only for the top leaders, but for others as well. Thus, leaders losing intra party competition often prefer to change the party or create their own one, even “sofa” type, and get the status of undisputed leaders there than to defend their views playing the second role within the large political structure.

The public activity of party leaders is directed mainly not on persuasion, but on emotional mobilization of the target audiences of electorate. That is why their political participation unavoidably becomes symbolic. Every successful party leader, consciously or intuitively, uses in his or her public, especially pre-election, activities the symbols of hope, success, fear, enemy, future, defender, solidarity and others (Campbell, p. 2004). And tries to translate these symbols to as wide audiences, as he or she can.

The charismatic Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky appeared in politics just four years ago after the successful career of the comic actor. Zelensky’s party got its name after popular TV-serial, in which he played a schoolteacher occasionally becoming Ukraine’s president *Servant of the People*. It appeared at the Ukrainian political scene in December, 2017 a year before Zelensky had announced his crusade for presidency as a result of the *Party of decisive changes* renaming. Its first chairman was Ivan Bakanov Zelensky’s childhood friend, who later was appointed the head of the Security Service of Ukraine (Rudenko, 2022). It is interesting to point, that Zelensky never was in the ranks of this party, but there never were doubts in his leadership.

During the campaign Zelensky was presented to the voters as a symbol of peace, justice, renewal of the power and severe punishment to the corrupted officials. However, he has quickly demonstrated the readiness to use mentioned above traditional patterns of political behavior. “Zelensky’s victory brought new faces to Ukrainian politics. Wedding photographers and restaurateurs won seats in the chamber. But it quickly became clear that Zelensky had no real ideology and lacked any central plan for governing. Like his television alter ego, he elevated some of his best friends to top jobs. Some would be caught seeking bribes. One newbie parliamentarian was seen swiping through a dating app during votes” (Detsch,

2022). In fact, Zelensky's team has built a tough neopatrimonial pyramid with its leader on the top. So, it is not reasonable to talk about the new essence of the Ukrainian politics, concerning Volodymyr Zelensky and his political party.

**Conclusion.** The Ukrainian society preserves rather archaic forms of political culture and social relations, that determines the neopatrimonial patterns of political participation. Political parties act as the patron-client pyramids. Their leaders neglect ideologies, concentrating on the distribution of resources, and communicate with the voters in the symbolic space of myths and manipulations. It is obvious, that in such conditions the electoral behavior of Ukrainian citizens is very far from a rational choice. All these factors form prerequisites not only for political degradation, but for the socio-economic and humanitarian as well.

The system modernization of the Ukrainian society is deadly needed to change the described above situation. The exit can be found in the rationalization of political participation, creating the mechanisms of the tough civil control over the political class. The Ukrainians should make the political parties the representation instruments of their true interests. It is impossible without the active grassroots self-organizing, developing strong horizontal ties on the basis of common values, common images of the future, common understanding of their interests, and, as a result, a common political will.

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