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Ukrainian political parties in the times of war

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ABSTRACT

The activities of the Ukrainian political parties are studied in the context of martial law. This article is focused on four main aspects of political process in Ukraine in 2022–2025: political repressions and prohibition of parties, political radicalization, elections delay, and preparation for new political projects. The author argues that Ukrainian political spectrum had been artificially narrowed with the left parties forbidden and the right radicals' ideas incorporated in the official state ideology. This perturbation caused an increasing demand for the reload of the political system of Ukraine.

KEYWORDS: political parties, political process, political elites, political participation, election, political leadership, political projects, party affiliation, electoral behavior, political activity, right radicals, radicalization, political repressions.

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Introduction. The conflict with Russia, started from the political overturn in February 2014, that grew up to the full-scale war eight years later, put Ukraine into the focus of the world politics and media. In the last ten years Ukrainian studies were much more popular than ever before. However, these studies, conducted by think tanks, universities and individual researches, in general, concentrated on the main aspects of the international conflict – military (Center, 2025), economic, diplomatic, geopolitical (Masters, 2023), and their historical background (Badavi, 2023; Feinstein & Budjeryn 2022; Mankoff, 2022) as well. At the same time, many important internal factors, especially those of the current Ukrainian political life and its peculiarities in the times of war, are still poorly known to foreign observers.

The Russian–Ukrainian war from its very beginning was regarded highly pathetically by many intellectuals, and historic role of this war was very exaggerated (Reid, 2022). This conflict was presented as a crucial moment, a turning point for the world, at least for the Europe, a war over Ukrainian identity (Kasianov, 2022), that can change the world order and the world map drastically. Consequently, this

existentialism is reflected in the documents and public appeals of the political parties of Ukraine, whose leaders either truly believe in their special mission for saving humanity, at least the European civilization, or just cynically use this apocalyptic rhetoric.

The purpose of this article is to examine, how the war influences the political development of Ukraine, present the specifics of political process in Ukraine, analyzing activities of the political parties and their leaders. It should be mentioned, that it is important to study not only the parties that have their factions in the Verkhovna Rada of the current convocation. In some aspects, the activities of banned parties' leaders, new political projects' front men, radical groups, local politicians, political prisoners and political emigrants are even more interesting and useful for the research regarding the dynamics of the Ukrainian party system.

Prohibition of the “Pro-Russian” Parties and Targeted Political Repressions

The Verkhovna Rada on May 3 adopted the law 2243-IX introducing amendments to certain legislative acts of Ukraine regarding the ban on the activity of political parties (The Verkhovna, 2022a). The legislation expands the list of grounds for banning a political party through the courts. Relevant grounds are justifying, recognizing as lawful or denying armed aggression against Ukraine, including by presenting armed aggression of the Russian Federation and/or the Republic of Belarus against Ukraine as an internal conflict, civil conflict, or civil war. On May 14 President Volodymyr Zelensky has signed this law (Proskurova, 2022).

It should be mentioned, that the bill 7172-1 (the draft of this law) was proposed by a group of 35 (thirty five!) deputies from the ruling party on March 28. So, it went through all legal procedures just in fifty days (The Verkhovna, 2022b). That was very quickly for the law devastated the Ukrainian political landscape.

In 2022, as a result of the enforcement of this law, 16 political parties were banned, almost all in June (Marusyak, 2022). It is interesting to note, that the first in this ban list (on June 8, 2022 – just three weeks after the enforcement of the new law) had become the “Opposition Bloc”, connected by many experts with Rinat Akhmetov, the richest Ukrainian citizen. This party was always loyal to Ukraine, never demonstrated sympathy to Putin's Russia, and its leaders presented themselves as Ukrainian patriots. Moreover, all prominent figures of the “Opposition Bloc” several years were under Russian sanctions.

In 2023 two more parties were banned, among them the Party of Regions, which was, under the leadership of the ex-president Viktor Yanukovych, the most powerful in the Ukrainian politics from 2010 to 2014. One more party was banned in 2024.

In accordance with the Procedure for the Transfer of Property, Funds and Other Assets of a Political Party Banned by the Court, approved by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No.896 dated 12.08.2022, the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine has identified and transferred to the state ownership the following property, funds and other assets:

- cash in the amount of over 23.7 million hryvnias;
- 53 vehicles;

- 10 objects of intellectual property rights;
- 83 real estate properties (Official, 2023).

In general, 19 political parties with almost 3,000 of their structural entities (regional, city, district organizations and primary party cells) lost their legal status in the times of war. Three of them – the “Opposition Platform – For Life”, the “Opposition Bloc”, the “Our Land” – were represented in the current convocation of the Verkhovna Rada. Three others – the Communist Party of Ukraine, the Socialist Party of Ukraine, and the Party of Regions – were among the most powerful and influential in previous times with their leaders at the highest state positions. The majority of the banned parties belonged to the left wing of the left center of the Ukrainian political spectrum. In fact, it is possible to say, that after 2022 there are no left parties in Ukrainian politics. It is interesting to note also, that the state authorities have banned all strong enough political forces promoted local and regional self-governing, as well as ideas of the sovereign industrial development. So, the political landscape of Ukraine existed in the post-Soviet period of its history (Bielashko & Yakushik, 2016) had been changed drastically.

Despite the prohibition of political parties, many of their representatives, including iconic figures, have managed to maintain their positions in Ukrainian politics. For example, the 2019 presidential candidate from the “Opposition Bloc”, Oleksandr Vilkul, heads the military-civil administration of Kryvyi Rih, the birthplace of Volodymyr Zelensky (Burdyga, 2022). Yuriy Boyko – the first number on the electoral list of the “Opposition Platform – For Life” (“OPZZh”) in the parliamentary elections and the OPZZh candidate in the presidential elections – has headed the “Platform for Life and Peace” parliamentary group since April 2022 (at the time of publication, it consists of 21 deputies, all but one of whom were elected on the list of the banned party) (The Verkhovna, 2024). Obviously, such adaptability would have been impossible without personal agreements at the highest level.

At the same time, not all high-ranking members of the banned parties were able to reach an agreement with the authorities on terms acceptable to them. Several members of parliament were forced to resign their mandates and leave the country. Nestor Shufrich, a long-time comrade-in-arms of the odious Viktor Medvedchuk, ended up in Lukyanivska Prison, the most famous pretrial detention facility in Ukraine.

Growth of the Right Radicalism Supported and Used by the Authorities

Wikipedia gives the list of the Ukrainian ‘far-right political parties’ as this:

- Social-National Party of Ukraine (1991–2004);
- Ukrainian National Assembly (1990–present);
- Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (1992–present);
- Svoboda (political party) (2004–present);
- Social-National Assembly (2008–2015);
- Ukrainian National Union (2009–present);

- Right Sector (2013–present);
- National Corps (2016–present) (Wikipedia, 2025).

In 2022, as before in 2014–2015, there was a rapid increase in the resource base of the Ukrainian right radicals. They recruited new supporters en masse, formed elite combat units within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, received intensive media coverage, provided large-scale financing for their activities, and demonstratively dealt with ideological opponents. However, as sociological surveys show, this rapid growth has not received mass electoral support. The number of people ready to vote for representatives of the right-wing radicals in the elections remains critically low. Expressing their sympathies for the ‘military patriots’, Ukrainian voters are still going to vote for more moderate political parties.

The Ukrainian right radicals, especially those who have not become leaders, understand this situation very well. The author of the Telegram channel “Ballads of the IV Empire” (previously called “Tales of the IV Reich”) writes: “The right movement is going through hard times. High turbulence will only increase. A very small niche audience, but a lot of bright personalities are trampling on one square meter, pushing each other out. The winner should show itself to be a large and organized force, capable to influence radically the state of affairs. To influence, not to bargain. To sweep away everything in its path, not to sell out. Like in the good old days, when important people were guided by the Idea, not their own benefit” (Ballads, 2025).

At the same time, the activity of the right radicals and the positive media coverage of their activities determine the gradual radicalization of other political forces. Their slogans have become an integral part of the state ideology of modern Ukraine. Mainstream parties have adopted their rhetoric and conceptual apparatus. This led to a permanent radicalization of Ukrainian politics and society as a whole. As a result, citizens loyal to the regime actually extend their loyalty to the right radicals, including outright extremists. Others are forced to move into an ‘internal emigration’ with a voluntary rejection of any form of political participation, since it turns out to be either ideologically and morally unacceptable or simply dangerous.

Fears and hopes associated with the Ukrainian right radicals are mostly outside of party politics. They are perceived not as an alternative within the political and legal system, but as an anti-systemic alternative. Moreover, they are perceived not as an alternative to the government, but as an alternative to the opposition. In fact, they are now acting as anti-systemic guardians of the system, no matter how paradoxical it may seem at first glance.

Elections Delay and Political Disposition

In 2024 the next presidential and parliamentary elections should take place in Ukraine. However, Ukrainian political parties agreed to postpone elections until after the war. The agreement was reached at a meeting held in the format of the Jean Monnet Dialogue for Peace and Democracy on 10–12 November, 2023, in Zakarpattia. The Verkhovna Rada leadership, together with the chairs and delegated representatives of all parliamentary factions and groups signed the memorandum stated that “future free and fair national elections (parliamentary, presidential) shall be held after the end of the war

and the end of martial law with a period of time sufficient to prepare for elections (at least six months after the end of martial law)" (Shumilin & Romanenko, 2023).

This unanimous decision was foreseen with intensive information campaign, conducted by loyal to Zelensky media (Kalnysh, 2023). The arguments for the postponing elections were disseminated for

several months, not only in the Ukrainian media, but in the European and American as well – in order to insure the support of the Western political community. Moreover, this doubtful thesis was promoted by some well-known political scientists, close to the Ukrainian diaspora, stated that “organizing an inclusive, free, and fair national vote right now would be extremely challenging, and could damage Ukraine’s democracy” (Onuch & Way, 2024).

At the same time, the level of Zelensky’s popular support began to decline gradually to the prewar marks. This tendency inevitably downgrades the rating of his party. From May 16 to 22, 2024, the Kyiv international Institute of Sociology (KIIS) conducted the all-Ukrainian public opinion survey “Omnibus”, to which, by order of the Center for Strategic Communications “Forum”, questions were added about the 5th anniversary of president Zelensky. The results were alarming for the ruling party: only 7,2% assessed its record list positively, while 54,9% were dissatisfied (see Table 1) (Hrushetskyi, 2024a).

Table 1.

According to the results of the elections to the Verkhovna Rada, Volodymyr Zelensky’s party “People’s Servant” (“Sluha Narodu”) won the majority, which single-handedly formed the parliamentary majority. How would you rate its activity?

% in the column	Ukraine as a whole	West	Center	South	East
Very good	1.8	0.8	2.2	2.7	1.3
Rather good	5.4	3.5	5.3	6.1	10.3
Neither good nor bad / neutral	30.8	33.8	31.0	30.4	22.1
Rather bad	23.1	21.4	27.0	18.5	24.4
Very bad	31.8	35.4	27.8	32.1	36.1
DIFFICULT TO SAY (DO NOT READ)	6.0	4.0	6.7	9.4	1.1
REFUSAL TO ANSWER (DO NOT READ)	0.9	1.1	0.0	0.8	4.7

From December 1 to 9, 2024, the KIIS conducted another "Omnibus" regarding the activities of party factions in the parliament. Anton Hrushetskyi, the executive director of KIIS, asserts: "The Verkhovna Rada is traditionally perceived by Ukrainians as quite critical, but in this survey we see that the assessment of the activities of individual factions is better than the usual perception of the parliament as a whole" (Hrushetskyi, 2024b), arguing this statement by the fact that more than half of respondents – 55% – positively assess the activities of at least one faction from the list. However, none of the political forces represented in the Ukrainian parliament has positive balance of the respondents' assessment (see Table 2). This is a bright illustration of the deep crisis of the institute of political parties in Ukraine, and the political system in general. Moreover, the president's party "People's Servant" has the most negative balance of popular attitude (+18/-65). It is even worse than "Platform for Peace and Life", the deputy group left from the banned party of Viktor Medvedchuk (+15/-50). So, about two thirds of Ukrainians suppose that the ruling party hinders the development of their state. At the same time, the parties with the best marks – the "European Solidarity" (+36/-41) and the "Voice" (+29/-35) – can be described as pro-Western opposition.

Table 2.

Assess the activities of factions in the Ukrainian parliament. In your opinion, does the activity of such a faction in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine rather benefit Ukraine or hinder the development of the state?

Parliamentary faction	Rather benefits Ukraine	Rather hinder the development of Ukraine
"European Solidarity" / "Yevropeiska Solidarnist"	36	41
"Voice" / "Holos"	29	35
Parliamentary faction	Rather benefits Ukraine	Rather hinder the development of Ukraine
"Fatherland" / "Batkivshchyna"	25	47
"People's Servant" / "Sluha Narodu"	18	65
"Platform for Peace and Life" / "Platforma za Myr i Zhyttia"	15	50

To be more objective talking about Ukrainian sociology, it should be noted that a significant portion of respondents refuse to participate in social surveys, fearing punishment for their 'incorrect' views. And those who agree to answer sociologists' questions keep in mind the official state ideology and propaganda patterns.

In the end of the 2024 the topic of elections got the actuality again. Donald Trump's victory on the US presidential election had become a serious challenge for the Ukrainian regime even before his

inauguration. Ukraine's political parties had to change their agenda, trying to establish new contacts in Washington or refresh existing ones.

At the beginning of 2025 Zelensky claimed, that elections in Ukraine can be held "once we manage to achieve the end of the hot phase of the war for Ukraine along with a strong army, strong weaponry package, and strong security guarantees" (RFE/RL's, 2025). It can be assumed that Zelensky is ready to hold elections if he has good starting conditions for his re-election and the victory of his political project in the parliamentary elections, although it is still unclear whether it will be the "People's Servant" or some other party.

It is impossible to make political parties the representation instruments of Ukraine's national interests without the rationalization of political participation and the tough civil control over the political class (Bielashko, 2023). But it is very difficult for political parties to develop active grassroots self-organizing, as well as to build strong horizontal ties on the basis of common values and common images of the future, in the times of war. Especially, if these parties are not close enough to the state authorities.

The Ukrainian government, using martial law, harshly opposes any attempt to really compete with it. Therefore, the main political forces in opposition are looking for forms of political activity that provide an opportunity to distance themselves from the increasingly less popular government without entering into direct conflict with it, trying to delay the inevitable escalation of political confrontation. That is why the Ukrainian opposition is positioning itself diligently as 'constructive' and 'patriotic'. However, this mimicry helps only partially.

Petro Poroshenko's "European Solidarity" found itself in a rather difficult situation. Its leader is officially accused of treason, financing terrorism and assisting the activities of terrorist organizations. The corresponding suspicion was announced on December 20, 2021 – less than two months before the Russian invasion (Notice, 2021). In February 2024, the case was transferred to court, and in January 2025 new episodes appeared in it. At the same time, the ruling party initiated the removal of Poroshenko from participation in plenary sessions of the parliament. In addition, a campaign was launched to discredit his son Oleksiy Poroshenko as a draft dodger who fled abroad.

Yulia Tymoshenko has long minimized her public activity on key aspects of political discourse. Her party "Fatherland" has actually shown solidarity with the government, voting in parliament for all significant government initiatives. A similar line of political behavior is demonstrated by the above-mentioned Yuriy Boyko. It is significant that even the complete cessation of gas transit through Ukraine was not used by political 'old-timers' to criticize the government. And this is despite the fact that Tymoshenko and Boyko are professionals in the energy sector.

This situation, like a litmus paper, illustrates the generation gap in the Ukrainian politics. The youngers try to use any event to promote themselves and their agendas, while the elders try to keep their status and minimize risks. A good example is the deputy of the Verkhovna Rada Alexander Dubinsky, who is in pre-trial detention on suspicion of treason, asked on his Telegram channel: "I would really like to hear the position on the transit of Russian gas from our 'gas princess' Yulia Tymoshenko. Yulia Vladimirovna, you call yourself a gas specialist – tell us, how will all this affect the accounts of Ukrainians?" (Ganiv, 2025).

Preparation for New Political Projects

The expiration of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidential term has intensified the political process. A number of outsiders desiring to find their place among Ukrainian political actors look for the optimal format for their participation in the next electoral cycle, which can start immediately after the end of war and the lifting of martial law.

Valeriy Zaluzhny, who is considered a very promising candidate for the presidency, became the Ukrainian ambassador to Great Britain, essentially giving up his political career. However, it is quite possible that Zaluzhny will at the last moment become the front man of either a new political project created especially for him, or one of the parliamentary parties that are in dire need of rebranding. He published his memoirs with some criticism of Zelensky, met with Ukrainian military commanders, commented on major issues such as how a new Ukrainian elite could be formed or the West's global strategy. "Zaluzhny's popularity continues to grow, and at least **80** percent of Ukrainians say they trust him. In many ways, Zaluzhny's appeal lies in his status as an outsider – just like Zelensky when he was first elected president in **2019**... If Zelensky was hoping Zaluzhny's job in London would remove him from the political fray, he miscalculated" (Skorkin, 2025).

Kyrylo Budanov, the youngest head of the Main Intelligence Directorate during its entire existence, controls a powerful resource and positions himself as a "general of the new formation", a "blend of James Bond and George Patton" (GlobalSecurity.org, 2024). Budanov has a very wide space for political maneuver. As a political leader, he can unite Ukrainian patriots, ideologically neutral adherents of the 'strong hand', liberal pragmatics, technocrats, influential mayors and popular journalists. If Zelensky and/or Zaluzhny do not participate in the presidential elections, Budanov will have good chances to win. Moreover, in the case of extreme political turbulence, he may come to power using the special forces.

Several political projects compete for the right to reap the electoral harvest on the field of 'Antimaidan' (the name for the protests against **2014** state coup). They speculate on the mood of people criticizing not only President Zelensky and his party, but the political regime established in February **2014**. This agenda includes the following key issues:

- direct negotiations with the Russian Federation and the earliest possible conclusion of peace agreement;
- radical reduction of state functions and a real fight against corruption;
- revision of cultural and humanitarian policy (refusal to put pressure on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, ousting the Russian language, destroying the Soviet and imperial heritage);
- elimination of the influence of foreign agents ('sorosites') on Ukrainian politics, economy, and public administration.

At least three such projects can be identified as of early **2025**.

1. Aleksey Arstovich and Yuriy Romanenko can be considered the front men of a group of public experts gathered around the Ukrainian Institute for the Future, whose position is covered by an ever-expanding network of new media.

2. Anatoly Shariy is a well-known journalist and blogger, leader of the banned Shariy Party. He has been living in the European Union, recently in Spain, since **2012**, but remains a significant player in Ukrainian politics and media.

3. Aleksandr Dubinsky, Yevgeniy Shevchenko, Artem Dmitruk were members of the 'People's Servant' parliamentary faction elected in majoritarian constituencies. At different times and for different reasons, they found themselves in opposition to Zelensky and were suspected of committing treason. Dubinsky and Shevchenko ended up in the Lukyanovsky pretrial detention center, the most notorious prison in Ukraine, and Dmitruk illegally left the country and settled in London.

It is remarkable that all these figures were either quite closely affiliated with the authorities or played a significant role in the electoral triumph of Zelensky and his party in 2019.

Today, it is too early to talk about some kind of institutionalization of the above-mentioned projects. Moreover, it is not even entirely correct to call them projects. Rather, they are proto-projects formed through the ideological consolidation of audiences of public figures. The main channels of such virtual integration are YouTube and Telegram. Facebook plays a supporting role, as does the increasingly popular X (Twitter).

Conclusion. The return of Donald Trump to the White House has breathed new life into the Ukrainian politics. The change in the US Administration has become a powerful stimulus for the further evolution of the Ukrainian party system, which was effectively mothballed after the upheavals of 2022. All more or less significant political forces are trying to establish relations with Donald Trump's team. The rest are simply trying to position themselves as Trumpists. The disposition of parties in the next electoral cycle will largely depend on who show themselves as worthy partners for Washington to both American Republicans and Ukrainian voters.

The main challenge for both the government and the opposition, and for new political projects as well, is the peace agreement with Russia, which Trump has declared one of the main priorities of his foreign policy. Ukrainian society, which has been actively pumped with anti-Russian propaganda for ten years, is mostly not ready to accept the inevitable concessions. Ukrainians will frustrate in any case, even if the peace agreement, given the current situation, is maximally beneficial for their side.

Political parties can minimize this frustration by honestly explaining to their voters the real state of affairs and offering a realistic trajectory for further movement. In order to successfully cope with this task, they need to radically change the paradigm of their activities – from the logic of war to the logic of post-war development. Otherwise, the external enemy will be replaced by internal confrontation, and the Ukrainian political class, deprived of the constraints of wartime, will quickly move into the mode of 'war of all against all'.

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