

Ukrainian Parliamentary Election in a War Zone

Johan Deckmyn
Artūras Mankevičius
Nikolai Meinert

We, international observers of The International expert Center for Electoral Systems (ICES), arrived in Artemovsk on 18th of October to investigate and understand situation in Donetsk oblast at the eve of the parliamentary election in Ukraine. Almost for 10 days we had a chance to visit some tens of polling stations, meet and discuss with members and chairmen of commissions, mayors of cities, and candidates to parliament. We have visited District Electoral Commissions (DECs) and Precinct Electoral Commissions (PECs) in Artemovsk, Kramatorsk and Slavyansk regions. Separatists occupied all of these areas for several months, from middle of April until middle of July, 2014. The consequences of war were still seen everywhere.

In general, we recognize that the elections went through without flagrantly violating the laws, but still some infringements occurred.

The results of the elections might be affected because of: a very small number of citizens participated in the elections, voters' apathy and fear of the future (separatists can come back...), elections did not take place in several districts because of the hostility, thousands of refugees from the regions that are occupied by separatists, militants. It has been noticed that the election was influenced by the overall situation in the region. A lot of military machines, armed soldiers and military equipment (armed vehicles, tanks) were everywhere – in towns and villages all across the region, in all streets and roads; the block stations (roadblocks) needed to be crossed to reach any city and everybody had to be checked by armed people; any traffic was prohibited at night.



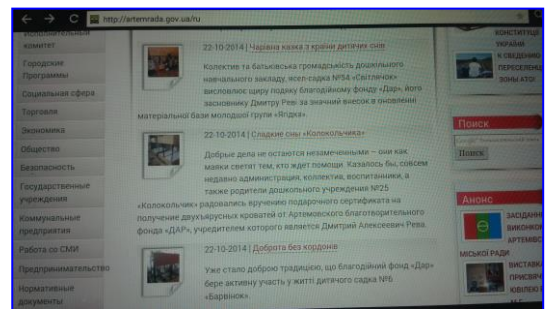
Because of total tensions, it was not strange that election commissions of different districts were changing their chairmen and members constantly, people were afraid to risk their lives and future. By the way, we haven't found any commission whose construction was not changed since its formation. Such castling even threatened to ruin some commissions work. PECs usually has about two months to prepare for elections, and to prepare for these elections many commissions had only 3 weeks or even less. On the elections day people were concerned for their safety, so number of electoral commissions got their requests to be protected not only by the police (as dependent under the law) but also by military.

Donetsk oblast is known as an area, where popularity of current government in Kiev was not very wide and opposition (former president Viktor Yanukovich party) could get majority of voters. We heard warnings that governmental forces can try to minimize voting ability in the this area and deliberately reduce number of PECs to harm opposition support. That is not true for DEC 46. Only two polling station on the territory of Donetsk oblast controlled by central Ukrainian government were

closed: in villages Kommuna and Novogrigoryevka. Both villages are under constant bombardment. We met head of Kommuna’s local community Svetlana Romanuha and she provide us with all arguments of inability to arrange normal work for polling station in her village: only 50 inhabitants (from originally 500 according to her list) still stay in the place under the permanent threat to their lives. All other moved to more save areas. In our presence Svetlana Romanuha made official request to DEC to close PEC in Kommuna community.

All refugees and displaced persons could get right to vote after simple procedure: to make an application no later than October the 20th, one week before election day. After changes in Voters Register, made by officials, they got a special coupon, which gives them right to vote in certain polling station close to their current place of residence. We controlled this procedure and mostly it worked well only with marginal mistakes almost inevitable in such a confusion situation when the war is just in tens kilometres. In addition, problem was that not all refugees new about such possibility in spite of mass information champagne in media. We can confirm that such efforts has been done.

All interviewed candidates for parliament declared that the election campaign was without black PR, non-aggressive. However, several candidates in Artemovsk (election district N46) reported that, in their view, one of the candidates get the city government support (father of candidate's Dmitry Reva is mayor in Artemovsk for 24 years, he is respected by local people and has a great influence and impact for the city as well as for city organizations subordinated by the government).



Screenshot from official Artemovsk city Internet site with promotion of activity of candidate Dmitry Reva (son of the Mayor). After complain this webpage was deleted.

In spite of reject to use dirty elections technologies by most candidates in this election district, several violent acts took place prior voting day. All of them were provoked not by candidates or parties but by armed militants. In city Seversk they by force took away poster of candidate Serhiy Klyuyev from one of his supporter activists. This poster later was shoot through and left as threat warning.



According to the statement of another candidate Alexandr Rzhavsky, he was attacked by soldiers from Ukrainian voluntary battallion “Artemovsk” and his car was damaged. We testify consequences shortly after his call.



Spent cartridge left near the car after shooting in tires. The car was used for candidate’s Alexandr Rzhavsky election champagne.

On Election Day we concentrated mostly on Artemovsk and villages and cities nearby. Our teams visited about 40 PECs. All together, the result was OK and we can say that elections went well. But, of course, some remarks can be done. Several cases we regarded as more or less serious ones.

In city Chasov Jar (Часів Яр in Ukrainian) in PEC N 140659 during counting city officials tried to interfere in the process. After we got a signal from one party headquarters, because their observers were expelled from the polling station, as they said, three of our international observers arrived there at about 01:00. They discovered an unauthorized person from city administration who tried to hide herself in a service room attached to polling station. She was unable to present any documents, which could justify her presence, so we called the police. An investigator arrived and an official report (protocol) was submitted. In the very beginning, upon our arrival, local militiamen didn't want to let us in, but later they started actively co-operate with us and even their boss (Dmitry Kudrenko) quickly arrived to the PEC. He was also very cooperative and helpful when we discovered violation of the law in this polling station.



City official from Chasov Jar could not justify her presence at polling station during votes counting.



Other cases looked marginal. On PEC 140626 (Artemovsk) six boxes for ballots were placed in very inconvenient way – 3 of them practically useless.

We saw armed persons with uniforms near entrance to PECs NN 140624 and 140625 (Artemovsk, 2 PECs in the same building). They told us that they got an order to guarantee protection of voting from their battalion commander, but we asked them to keep far

from the entrance and not to scare people and to try to become invisible. They followed our request.

Arrangement in DEC 46 (based in Artemovsk) on Monday, October 27, (day after elections) was awful: small room and hundreds of people waiting to present voting papers, reports and ballots from all PECs in the district, crowding, shouting, pushing each other. No place to rest, there were even no benches to sit. Total chaos! Waiting time in several cases exceeded ten hours after sleepless counting night for PEC's members. Our colleagues from ICES mission reported about similar situation in DECs in some other parts of Ukraine.



All of us took part in observation of counting procedure in different PECs. That means we covered 3 PECs in Artemovsk and everything in our presence was correct.

We also got a complaint from PEC members on polling station N 140640 (Artemovsk) because of the behaviour of one of the candidates – Aleksiy Losa (party Svoboda). On the day of the elections he came to the polling station dressed in military uniform, demanded special attention and made

several remarks which were regarded by PEC as hinted threats. But nothing serious happened; he only demanded to change places of information posters with descriptions of candidates.

During E-Day we were protected by SBU (Ukrainian security service) and their work was very professional and sufficient. They were invisible, didn't scare voters, but helpful every time we needed them. For example – they helped us to drive to Chasov Jar from Artemovsk at night through roadblocks, when it was necessary to investigate a serious complaint.

In city Krasny Liman (Красний Лиман) was the case, where a small PEC stamped the “cancelled”-mark on the wrong candidate's name. It was widely covered by media.

Elections in Donetsk oblast took place in very complicate circumstances – probably one of the most difficult in our experience. However, from another hand, all necessary requirements for elections according to Ukrainian law were implemented as correct as it was possible in current conditions.



Election observers from ICES (two from the left) near the backdoor of DEC 46 in Artemovsk

©Text & Images
Johan Deckmyn
Artūras Mankevičius
Nikolai Meinert