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POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH  
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

# BULLETIN

No. 17 (867), 18 February 2016 © PISM

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## Poroshenko's Risky Play with Ukraine's Government

Piotr Kościński

*The Ukrainian parliament on 16 February did not back a vote of no confidence in the government. Voting was conducted at the request of the two parties of the ruling coalition after sharp criticism by President Petro Poroshenko of Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk. Paradoxically, however, the government was able to remain in place mainly because, despite the criticism, a group of deputies in the president's camp and some opposition members did not vote. After the vote, two parties left the coalition—Batkivshchyna and Samopomich, leaving the future of the cabinet in question. A larger power struggle not only could stop reforms in the country but carry the risk of large public protests, which would be dangerous for Ukraine.*

**Problems with the Yatsenyuk Government.** A no-confidence vote against Ukraine's government failed this past week, picking up support from 194 deputies but requiring 226 votes to pass, even though the Verkhovna Rada had 247 votes when it decided the government's work was unsatisfactory when it rejected Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk's report (which has no legal effect). These votes were the result of a declaration published by President Petro Poroshenko, who stressed that the government had lost the support of the ruling coalition and called on Yatsenyuk to make sweeping changes in the composition of his cabinet. He emphasised that a new government should be formed based on the current coalition of Petro Poroshenko's Bloc "Solidarity," the People's Front, led by Yatsenyuk, Samopomich, the leader of which is the mayor of Lviv Andriy Sadovy, and Batkivshchyna, the group led by Yulia Tymoshenko. Poroshenko objected at the same time to holding early elections. In parallel, he appealed for the resignation of Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin, who is accused of corruption and is extremely unpopular. Shokin complied but it must still be accepted by parliament.

The Yatsenyuk government is seen very negatively by the majority of the population. According to research by Reytyng group published in early February, only 8% of respondents appreciate the prime minister's actions and 70% would like him to resign. Importantly, 50% also want early parliamentary elections, and 48% seek presidential ones. In this context, it is worth noting that support for Poroshenko has also significantly decreased since his election. In January, only 13.9% of respondents said they would vote for him if there were an election.

**Voting by Dictate of the President and Oligarchs.** Poroshenko's demands had the result that deputies from Samopomich and Batkivshchyna, long critical of the government, gathered the required 150 signatures that led to the vote of no confidence. Prime Minister Yatsenyuk managed to remain in office because some deputies from Bloc "Solidarity," even though they were present, decided not to vote and removed their cards from the electronic voting system. On the other hand, most of the deputies of Opposition Bloc, as well as opposition groups Vidrozhennya, were absent without explaining why.

Most likely it Poroshenko had his deputies not vote because in criticising the government he preferred it reform rather than fall. On the other hand, the absence of most of the deputies of Opposition Bloc (of 42, only 10 were present and just eight voted) can be explained by the possible influence of leading oligarch Rinat Akhmetov (who supports this group of deputies financially), who did not want to contribute to the fall of the cabinet. Also, 22 members of Vidrozhennya (another opposition group, but not belonging to Opposition Bloc, which came from the

disgraced Party of Regions) did not participate in the vote, most likely at the request of another oligarch, Ihor Kolomoyski.

**Poroshenko's Game.** In a statement published on Monday, Poroshenko did not call for Yatsenyuk's resignation. Poroshenko also did not initiate the no-confidence vote, although paradoxically after his critical statements, "Solidarity" deputies seemingly had to support the vote when called by Samopomich and Batkivshchina. Their actions on the floor, however, led to the motion's failure.

Although he would prefer the prime minister be someone more dependent on him than Yatsenyuk, Poroshenko for various reasons does not want to bring him down right now. The first reason is that although Yatsenyuk's Popular Front polls support within the limits of statistical error (1–2%), the party still has a significant number of MPs (82). In addition, the resignation of the prime minister could mean the collapse of the coalition, which the president wants to avoid. A second reason is that by pointing to errors and the lack of an effective cabinet, the president is trying to move away from responsibility for reforms deemed to be moving too slowly. A third reason, claimed by media, is that politicians from abroad do not want Yatsenyuk to leave or excessive strengthening of Poroshenko's hand and intervened (U.S. Vice President Joe Biden recently spoke by phone several times with Poroshenko).

As a result, Yatsenyuk remains prime minister, although his political position is very weak. From his point of view, the temporary peace with Poroshenko means he will continue his duties as prime minister, but in much worse circumstances. This also means that Poroshenko may have easier control of the government. Moreover, given that the public's reluctance to Yatsenyuk may still grow, it is expected that in due time the president may exert pressure on him alone to step down. Paradoxically, that may be supported by deputies of the Popular Front, especially knowing that in the event of early elections they would lose their seats.

**Conflicting Interests.** During the no-confidence vote, a large role was played by political and economic interests of other players in the Ukrainian political scene. Oligarchs at odds with Poroshenko were not interested in reshuffling the government right now because it would strengthen the president's position. For Kolomoyski (who is a leading opponent of the president) and Akhmetov, more important would be the creation of a coalition that would lead to a government favourable from their point of view to business interests. Because Yatsenyuk has not acted against them or operated at the margins of the law, his stay as head of government is not a problem for the oligarchs. It is also likely that there has been agreement between Yatsenyuk, Kolomoyski, Akhmetov and the leading Opposition Bloc deputy, Serhiy Lovochkin (a former close associate of Victor Yanukovych), but it was the absence of MPs from Poroshenko's Bloc that decided the fate of the government, not the opposition deputies.

Advocates of change, both in the government and the opposition, showed their determination. The coalition groups that consistently vote against the government include only Batkivshchina and Samopomich. The government was opposed by a former coalition member turned opposition, the Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko. These parties, although having different positions, present themselves today as pro-reform and pro-European but wanting fundamental changes in both the composition and programme of the cabinet. What's more, they have criticised both the president and the prime minister, especially Yulia Tymoshenko, who is counting on returning at least in the position of prime minister. The party of the former prime minister is the firmest and most committed against the government. On 16 February, her party announced the withdrawal of its only minister, Minister of Youth and Sport Ihor Zhdanov, and a day later left the ruling coalition altogether. Samopomich decided to do the same on 18 February. It has 26 seats, so the coalition after the departure of Batkivshchina and Samopomich will have just 217 votes, or less than a majority (226).

**Possible Scenarios.** In the near future there are three possible scenarios. The first one assumes that Yatsenyuk will find support from other parties to regain the majority and that he will remake his cabinet. We already know, however, that this will not be a significant change because, for example, Poroshenko Bloc has designated five ministers who must remain in the government. A lack of significant changes may, however, lead to an increase in public unrest because Ukrainians expect the implementation of promises, such as the fight against corruption and, while noting their continuous deterioration in living standards, measures to improve the economy.

The second scenario assumes, however, that due to the disintegration of his coalition, Yatsenyuk resigns. The strongest groups in parliament manage to restore a majority. At the head of the government comes a person directly dependent on the head of state, such as former Deputy Prime Minister now chairman of the Verkhovna Rada Volodymyr Groysman, the leader of the Poroshenko Bloc Yuriy Lutsenko, or the West's favourite Finance Minister Natalie Jaresko. However, this would not be a significant change, and to the public, irrelevant. This scenario, however, is rather unlikely.

The probability of a third scenario is increasing and it is the dissolution of the coalition and early elections. This scenario also assumes an increase in public unrest, which in an extreme case could lead to a new Maidan, the effects of which would be completely unpredictable. In this case, an important role may be played by such politicians as Tymoshenko and the former president of Georgia turned Ukrainian citizen Mikheil Saakashvili.

In the background of these events, also important will be the actions of external actors. On the one hand, Western countries will try to help the Ukrainian politicians reach compromise and will press for the much-needed reforms. On the other hand, Russia may try to foster further unrest, hoping that in the short term the political chaos will force Ukraine to delay the implementation of the economic portions of the Association Agreement with the EU and in the longer term, a worn-out Ukrainian public dispenses with the uncertain, pro-Western path of development.