

Larysa Kobuta

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Larysa KOBUTA

Precarpathian Vasyl Stefanyk National University, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine

“Phantom” Parties in the Ukrainian Political Space

Abstract: The paper deals with the problem of quantitative and qualitative functioning of the political parties in modern Ukraine. It studies particular political structures which avoid their active political positioning, have an unsystematic, sporadic character of their political activity or imitate their active participation in the political life. Existence of the “phantom” parties in the Ukrainian political system has negative consequences as it withholds the party system qualitative structuring process.

Keywords: election, activity imitation, party, Ukrainian party system, phantom parties, fake

The development of the modern Ukrainian political system is closely connected with the issue of political parties' place and role in the party and political life of the state. Parties' active participation in the social-political processes gives them a possibility to articulate key political, ideological, and social-economical messages, which depict the level of social consciousness and citizens' needs. Once they win elections, parties try to put into life their pre-election promises as well as make sure their staff gets a sufficient number of official positions in the authority offices. This way citizens' participation in the party life makes it possible to fulfil both their social and personal (corporate) interests. The essence and importance of the political parties' activity is their constructive character, but Ukrainian reality demonstrates an essential difference between the theoretical and practical sides of the modern party system functioning.

Ukrainian multi-party system roots from the beginning of the year 1990 when in the process of the current Soviet Union Communist Party political monopoly termination, as well as the Communist Party of Ukraine as its republican branch, there have been created half a dozen of new political parties. In 1990 among the first parties there was registered Ukrainian political party, a completely anti-

communist structure which spoke for the republic leaving the Soviet Union and received a wide electoral support. Its ten representatives became national deputies of the newly-elected Verkhovana Rada of the USSR (the Supreme Council of the USSR, the parliament), and over a hundred of its members got their deputy mandates in the executive official offices of different local councils. In 1991, when Ukraine actually got its independence there were officially registered nine more political forces. It has to be taken into account that KPRS–KPU (Soviet Union Communist Party – Ukrainian Communist Party) activity was banned on the territory of Ukraine in August, 1991¹.

The process of the active party multiplication sped up after the law “On public associations” was successfully passed in the Ukrainian parliament in 1992. According to the law, the principles of party registration and activity were fairly liberal. As a result, in the year 2000 the number of the officially registered and recognized on the state level parties reached one hundred and then confidently beaten this mark. At the same time there were only a few dozens of active parties among them, if to take into account their participation in a real political life, the rest of the registered associations remained unknown even to professional experts and analysts.

In April 2001 the Ukrainian parliament adopted a law “On political parties”, which defined a new procedure of registrations and listed more complicated requirements to the processes of creation, registration and functioning of political organizations². According to the law, the Ministry of Justice as well as its regional offices checked the activities of the registered parties. The scrutiny resulted in the removal of the 28 parties from the register, as they showed no evidence of participation in the political life³.

Nevertheless, it had no influence on the political parties’ number reduction, which was predicted by experts. In May 2012 the Ministry of Justice registered the 200th party, and in this very moment, i.e. May 2015, the total number of political parties in Ukraine equals 262⁴.

¹ Today there are five political structures in the Ukrainian official register of political parties which root back to the Soviet times (1990–1991): Ukrainian Farmers Democratic Party, Green Party of Ukraine, Democratic Party of Ukraine, Socialist Party of Ukraine, Political Party Ukrainian Platform “Sobor” (as a legal heir of the Ukrainian Republican Party “Sobor”). See: *Ресур політичних партій*, <http://drs.gov.ua/show/202> (accessed 12.5.2015).

² See: *Закон України “Про політичні партії” від 5 квітня 2001 р.*, <http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2365-14> (accessed 20.02.2012).

³ М. Кармазіна, *Чи є партії агентами демократії*, Дзеркало тижня 2012, по. 1, р. 1–13.

⁴ See: *Ресур політичних партій*, <http://drs.gov.ua/show/202> (accessed 12.5.2015).

Meanwhile, there are only 20–30 party structures which take an active part in the real political life of the state or its regions. They might be represented on the parliamentary and governmental levels, as well as be members of the local authorities and self-government. Among these political organizations as leaders of the political process, there is still a part for parties which play a role of dependent satellites, they serve as a so-called political “makeweight” and disappear inside the well-known party mega-structures.

During the election races the number of parties willing to participate always grows up a little bit, though most of them are “dumb performers” who fake involvement in the election processes. For example, during the pre-term parliamentary election in October 2014 there were 52 parties which became the electoral law subjects, that is every sixth party of the 230 parties registered⁵. The functioning of the rest (and the rest is made in a great part of registered organizations) has either a sporadic or imitating character, or is absent at full length. They have no partnerships with well-known political brands, they are rare objects of the political experts’ discussions, they rarely get into the media’s sight. The only evidence of their existence is the official register data in the Ministry of Justice and its regional departments.

In the Ukrainian scientific literature in these terms attention is usually paid to the parties which lead the political process. As a rule, researchers analyze activities of the parliamentary (system) parties and their influence on the state political life development, as well as their place and role in the processes of forming and transforming of the party system. The existence of the party structures in the “shadows” of the political heavy-weighters is still to be studied. That is why this segment of the Ukrainian party environment calls for our attention. It is mainly represented by organizations with a whole range of name to be applied to them: quasi-parties, fake parties, elfin parties, phantom parties, invisible parties, etc. There are different reasons to explain their existence.

Some of them are the leftovers of the former well-known political forces that were unable to stay competitive and found their place near the margins of the

⁵ There were only 31 political organizations that formed their electoral party lists, 29 of them were allowed to participate. The rest, made up of 21 parties, balloted their candidates through one-mandate majority electoral polls or suggested their representatives as members of the electoral boards which is also considered to be a kind electoral participation. Only 6 parties won the election based on party lists: “Petro Poroshenko’s Block”, “National Front”, “Opposition Block”, “Oleh Liashko Radical Party”, Union “Samopomich” (Self-help), and Ukrainian union “Batkivschyna” (Motherland). Ten more parties were represented in the parliament by their one-mandate deputies, <http://www.cvk.gov.ua/pls/vnd2014/wp001> (accessed 24.11.2014).

political life. Among them there are the once powerful right-sided Democratic Party of Ukraine, National Movement of Ukraine, Ukrainian Republican Party, Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, as well as left-sided parties like Farmers Party of Ukraine, Socialist Party of Ukraine, and Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine. One more group is made of the so-called “power parties”, which greatly influenced the political course of the state: Agricultural Party of Ukraine, National-democratic Party, Social-Democratic Party of Ukraine (united), “Nasha Ukraina” (Our Ukraine), National Party, etc. All of them had their political biography, political recognition and electoral support, they were represented on the parliamentary and governmental levels, on the local authority level. Their attempts to come back to the Ukrainian political top failed, so today they remain loser-parties. Their regional organizations stopped their existence, and their political staff switched to more successful political structures.

Another group of political outsiders is made of parasite-parties, adjusters, which have a necessary minimum regional net and a few known-enough politicians to imitate their activity. Ukrainian experts call them “sofa” parties, as far as they essentially are unions of close circles of people or business structures, whose aim is to lobby certain business interests or just to earn money. Having no real public support, not to mention real activists, these “public unions” maintain their activity only formally, when they sit on sofas and write their press-releases⁶.

This type of political structures is represented by the so-called “pocket” parties, structures which have been created by certain politicians in order to help them in obtaining a deputy mandate, and which serve as evidence of their ambitions or a self-PR means. There are more than two dozens of similar political projects present in the current political process, and their existence is due to the political leaders’ ambitions and plans to stay on the same political level. Their “star time” was in the post-orange period (2005–2010), and they had their representatives both in the “orange” and “white-and-blue” political camps. The main objective of their activity was to imitate active work, to form a “fighter for truth” personal image, and to present their political organization as a potential alternative to the current electoral leaders. In fact, they played in the hands of political mega-structures, aiming at their personal or corporate interest satisfaction and being far-away from the declared goals.

A great part of elfin political parties show no political work signs. On the formal side, they have the whole set of attributes necessary for a registered structure:

⁶ С. Сірий, “Диванні партії” безпорадність чи гра на Януковича, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2012/02/3/6950303/> (accessed 3.02.2012).

a name, statute, party programme, bank account, commercial domicile, and, what is the most important, a party seal. In the real political life they are not easily spotted for their activity might be next to nonexistent, though their ideological platform, activity programme and probable regional network make up sufficient basis for their functioning⁷. A competent Ukrainian scientist M. Karamzina called such political structures *fake-structures* (*fake-parties*). Their main task is to distract voters, to rob real candidates of their chances to get deputy mandates, to provide electoral boards with “controlled” representatives⁸.

A typical phantom party, besides having all the registration documents, is also represented by a formal leader, by hired technical and communication specialists and by a minimal number of registered regional organizations. As practice shows, the main aim of such political objects is to use their names and theoretical resources during electoral campaigns once or several times. Virtual existence of phantom parties allows their leaders and owners to go into different political manipulations and party bidding, this way they show their nominal support of certain political structures and electoral subjects.

This behaviour type was especially popular with “elfin parties” at the beginning of the 21st century, when major political actors were staging creations of the vast political unions (blocks, coalitions) for their voters in order to support certain candidates, e.g. candidates for the position of president, city major or regional deputy. Creating their own popular political image, major parties’ leaders were not ashamed to use for their benefit the announced support from smaller and less-known parties, as well as newly-created political structures. Heads of the latter were eager to sign joint declarations, resolutions, announcements, etc. This is how the process of elfin parties’ legalization was carried out, and they were recognized as party subjects. Heads of elfin parties or leaders of their regional branches also received additional publicity benefits as they appeared in different informational-propaganda materials.

One more reason for phantom parties to exist is commercial interest, a possibility to sell a registered structure with profit. It became especially popular after

⁷ The absolute majority of the Ukrainian political parties’ programs have no practical side; they are made up from a standard set of declarations and wishes, which have nothing to do with the real life. It is true for both phantom parties and leaders of electoral races, *Програми 99% партій відірвані від життя – експерт А. Біденко*, http://gazeta.ua/articles/politics/_programi-99-partij-vidirvani-vid-zhittya-ekspert/489541 (accessed 27.03.2013); *Порівняння програм політичних партій*, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2014/10/21/7041350/> (accessed 21.10.2014).

⁸ М. Кармазіна, *Фейк-утворення і тоск-об’єкти у контексті виборів до Верховної Ради України 2012 р.* [in:] *Парламентські вибори 2012 року в Україні. Наукові дослідження*, Київ 2013, pp. 40–41.

the proportional electoral system came into force, together with the corresponding law package, according to which it is obligatory for a party to remain active for at least one year after registration and to have a regional organization network (even if it exists only formally). A demand for the already existing (conserved) structures caused the appearance of a whole range of legal campaigns, which were eager to sell “ready-made” parties to their clients. Party prices depended on the time of their registration, the quantity of their regional organizations, their names, history, reputation, and other criteria. New owners of an old registered party could change its name, invite popular political personalities, and create an attractive party project which would be used in order to reach certain goals⁹. An old “ugly duckling” could become a successful party project, and it could serve as an inspiration for other political adventure seekers.

The existing party list includes lots of names of clones and twins of well-known party organizations created through ideological or name similarities. These one-day parties are created for a short-time usage, usually only once. They conduct thoroughly destructive activities, they aim at disorienting voters and defaming “original” parties, but their main objective is to confuse the public and take no responsibility for it.

Technical usage of virtual parties in order to fill the regional and local electoral boards with “their” representatives is a rather effective way for a whole range of powerful party brands, who are subjects of the electoral process. It is a means to get an additional resource in the electoral boards formed from “independent” party representatives, besides having their own board party members. The party membership of these recommended “experts” changes during electoral campaigns, but the formal side of their applications is in order (polling, quota, and party members’ election priority order) and candidates meet all the criteria to be appointed board members. This approach is morally and legally faulty, i.e. differences between the declared weight and influence of parties and the real state of things with the former, the latter finds its realization mainly through the usage of administrative resources, which is understood as usage of financial and authoritative possibilities by certain political powers in order to influence the public opinion and political choices of voters. It also nullifies the openness and competitiveness of politics to a great extent.

The register of political parties shows that a certain part of the less-known structures have their official quarters legal addresses where their leaders live,

⁹ О. Радчук, *Місцеві вибори 2015 року: гра в рулетку за старими правилами*, <http://firtka.if.ua/?action=show&id=76558> (accessed 12.05.2015).

sometimes not even in the regional centres, but in small towns and villages. It is a rhetorical question to ask about the possible influence of such structures, though, in recent years experts do not ignore the perspectives of development of the regionally-oriented projects¹⁰.

There are well-known cases in Ukraine when local political projects grew to become successful national parties. Some local politicians might be inspired by the example of the Party of Regions, a power party until recently, which started on its way to the political Olympus as a regional political lobbyist group. Another bright example is a successful project of the Lviv City Mayor: registered in 2012 the party “Samopomich” (Self-help) entered the Parliament in only two years. So, nowadays, in many regions, e.g. Kharkiv, Cherkasy, and Odessa regions, they work on the creation of similar political projects, and their first target is to win local election in Autumn 2015¹¹. At the same time, there were registered 66 new parties over the period of one year and a half: 39 of them in 2014, and 27 – in 2015. The Voters Committee stresses a characteristic peculiarity: most of the newly created parties do not carry out informational work on the local level, they are not mentioned in the mass media and they still have not started their activities¹².

The above-mentioned peculiarities of the phantom parties do not make a complete list. We tried to show a part of the Ukrainian political life behind the curtains that stands in the way of modernization of the Ukrainian political system.

Invisible parties still outnumber active parties who maintain their political work. Despite their purely negative influence, elfin parties will stay on the political stage even if the recent prognosis about the two-party system (hegemonic parties’ domination) or block system (power and opposition blocks) comes true. The attempt to get rid of them by administrative means of second registration, practical activity revision and similar acts, which took place in 2001, proved to be ineffective. Besides, leaders of the party-political process are still eager to use such structures and the level of demand for them is high.

Preservation of the current state of affairs brings harm to the very basis of party life, as it betrays the voters’ faith in political parties as institutions, in their possibility to influence state authority activities through active participation in political

¹⁰ Л. Петренко, “Анатолій Романюк: В Україні відсутня політична культура компромісу”, http://gartua.io.ua/s214944/anatoliy_romanyuk_v_ukraeni_vidsutnya_politichna_kultura_kompromisu (accessed 04.10.2012).

¹¹ See: *Основні висновки опитування регіональних експертів КВУ “Півроку до місцевих виборів: нові гравці та старі проблеми”*, http://www.cvu.org.ua/nodes/view/type:news/slug:Pivroku_do_miscevyh_vyboriv_novi_gravci_ta_stari_problem (accessed 21.04.2015)

¹² Ibidem.

structures, and in their chances to support the development of the elements of the civil society. As long as narrow interests of the main political powers dominate the nominal principle of the open party competitiveness, and as long as they use dirty technological tricks of “phantom” parties, the Ukrainian political system will stay far behind the general European political standards.