

Politics in the Time of War: Ukraine's Home Front

Serhiy Kudelia, Baylor University

University of Basel, October 16, 2023

Outline of the Lecture

- The Meaning of Ukraine's "Political Intermission"
- Ukrainian Politics prior to 2014: Actors and Drivers
- Political Impact of the First Russian Invasion
- Poroshenko, Zelensky and the War in Donbas
- "The Long War" and the Return of Politics?

Political *intermission* or new type of politics?

- Absence of space for political competition
- Suspended procedures of political contestation
- Limits on major civic rights and liberties
- From “performative democracy” to a “theater of one”?

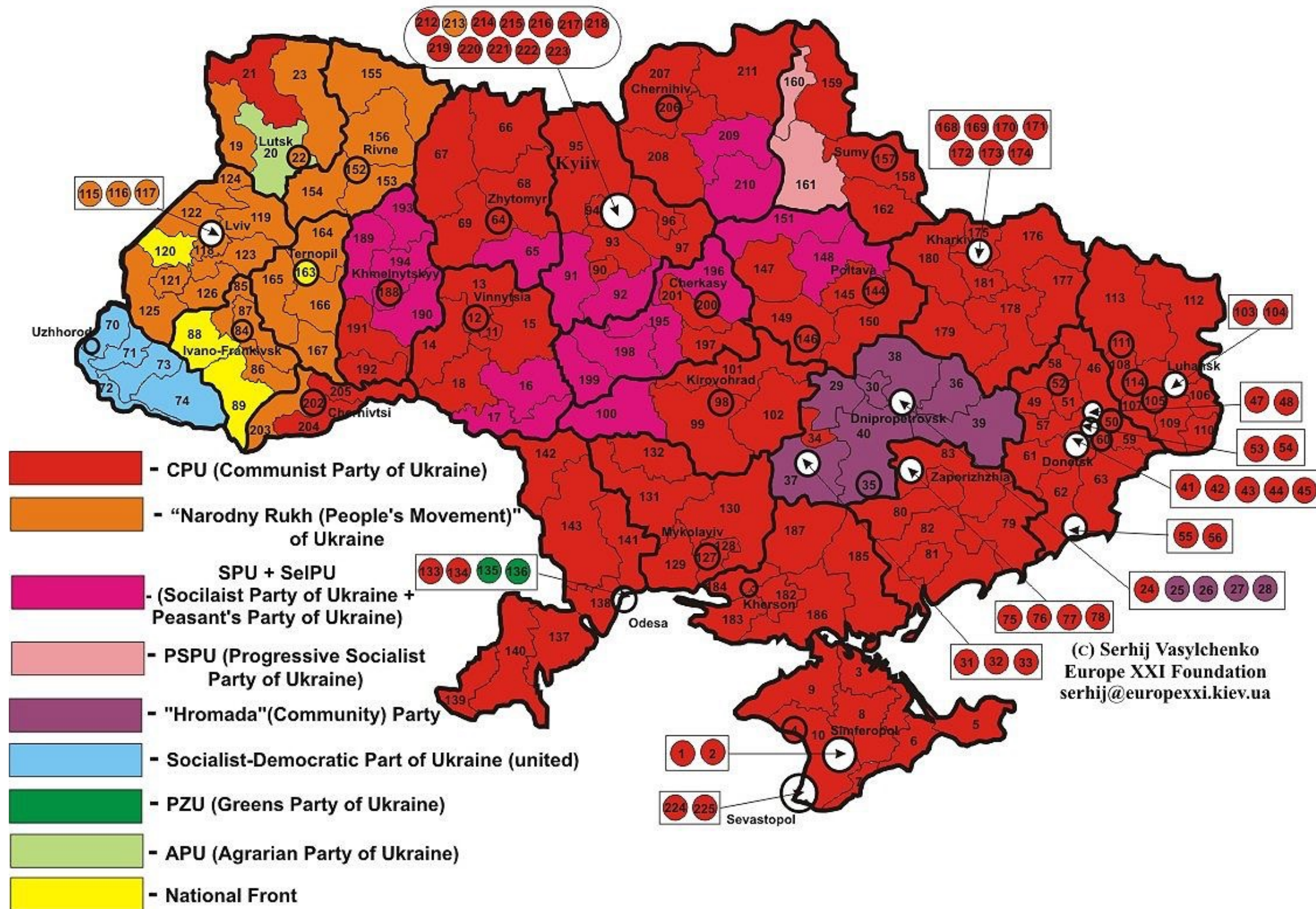
Ukrainian Politics before 2014

What was It All About?

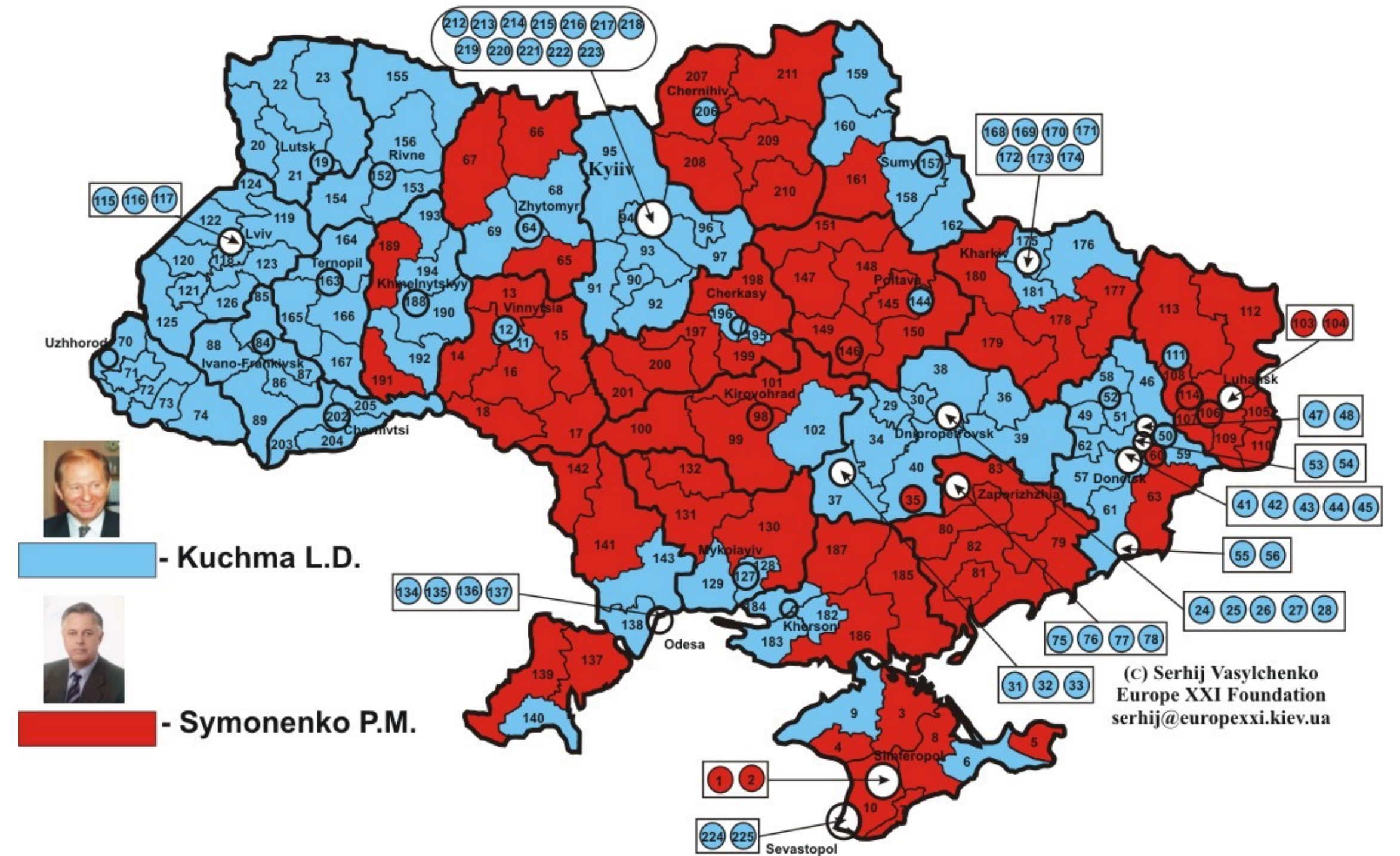
- **1990s:** Communist Restoration vs Liberalized State-building (ended in 1999)
- **Early 2000s:** Autocracy vs Democracy (ended in 2004)
- **Late 2000s:** Competing Nation-Building Projects (ended in 2014)
- **2010s:** Europe vs Russia (ended in 2014)

Soviet Legacy: Communist Support in 1998 and 1999 Elections

PARTIES (BLOCKS) THAT HAVE RECEIVED THE LARGES PERCENTAGE ON PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS BY PRECINCT (1998)



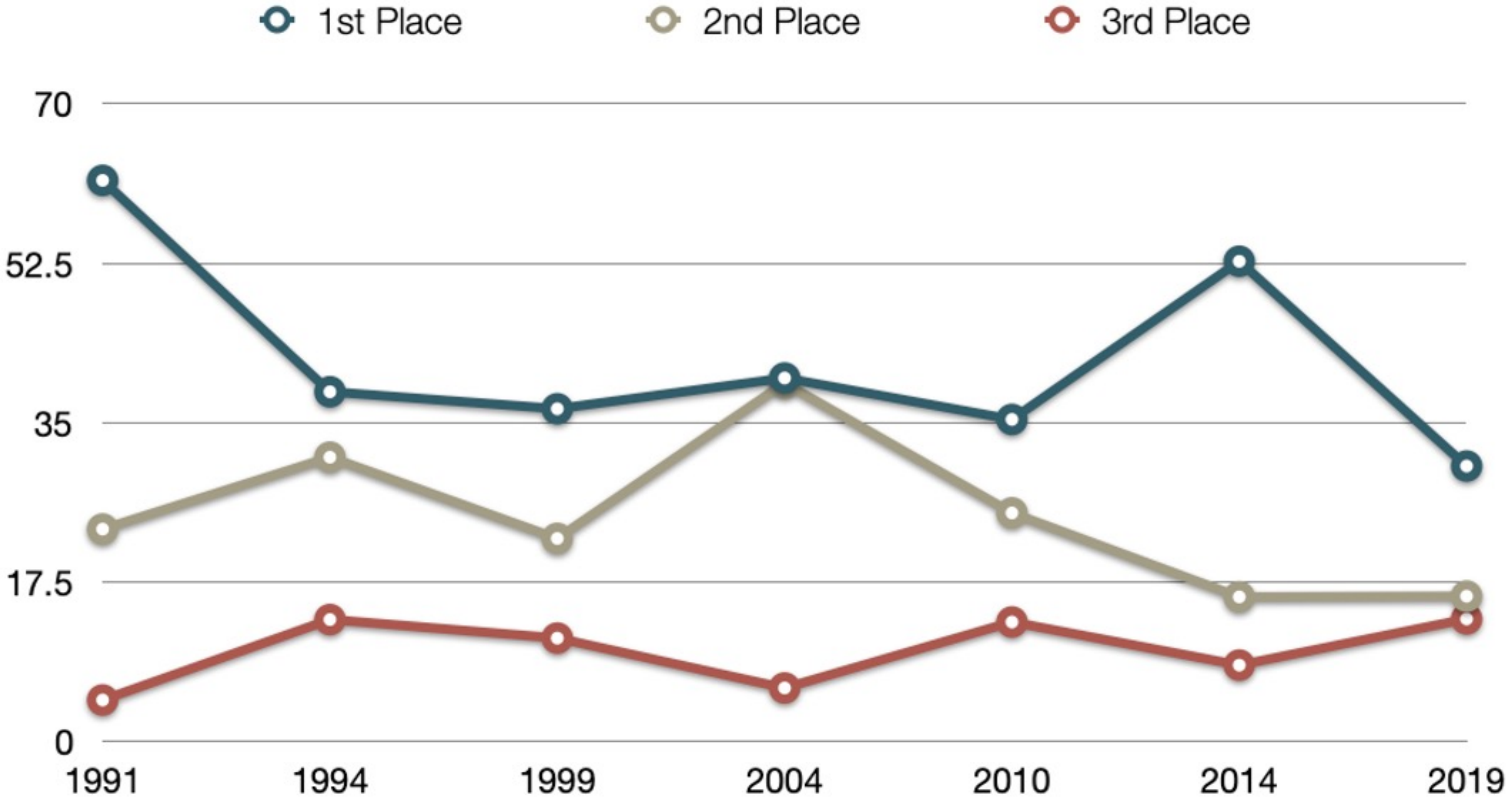
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES, THAT HAVE RECEIVED THE LARGEST PERCENTAGE OF THE VOTES BY PRECINCT (1999-SECOND ROUND)



How was pre-2014 Ukrainian politics conducted?

- Personality-driven contests for power, but *no dominant actor*
- Informal elite alliances *mattered more* than formal political parties
- Political *parties* viewed as *business* investments (politics as continuation of business)
- Voting as a short-term transaction (clientelism)

Elite Competition: Presidential Elections, 1st Round Results, 1991-2019

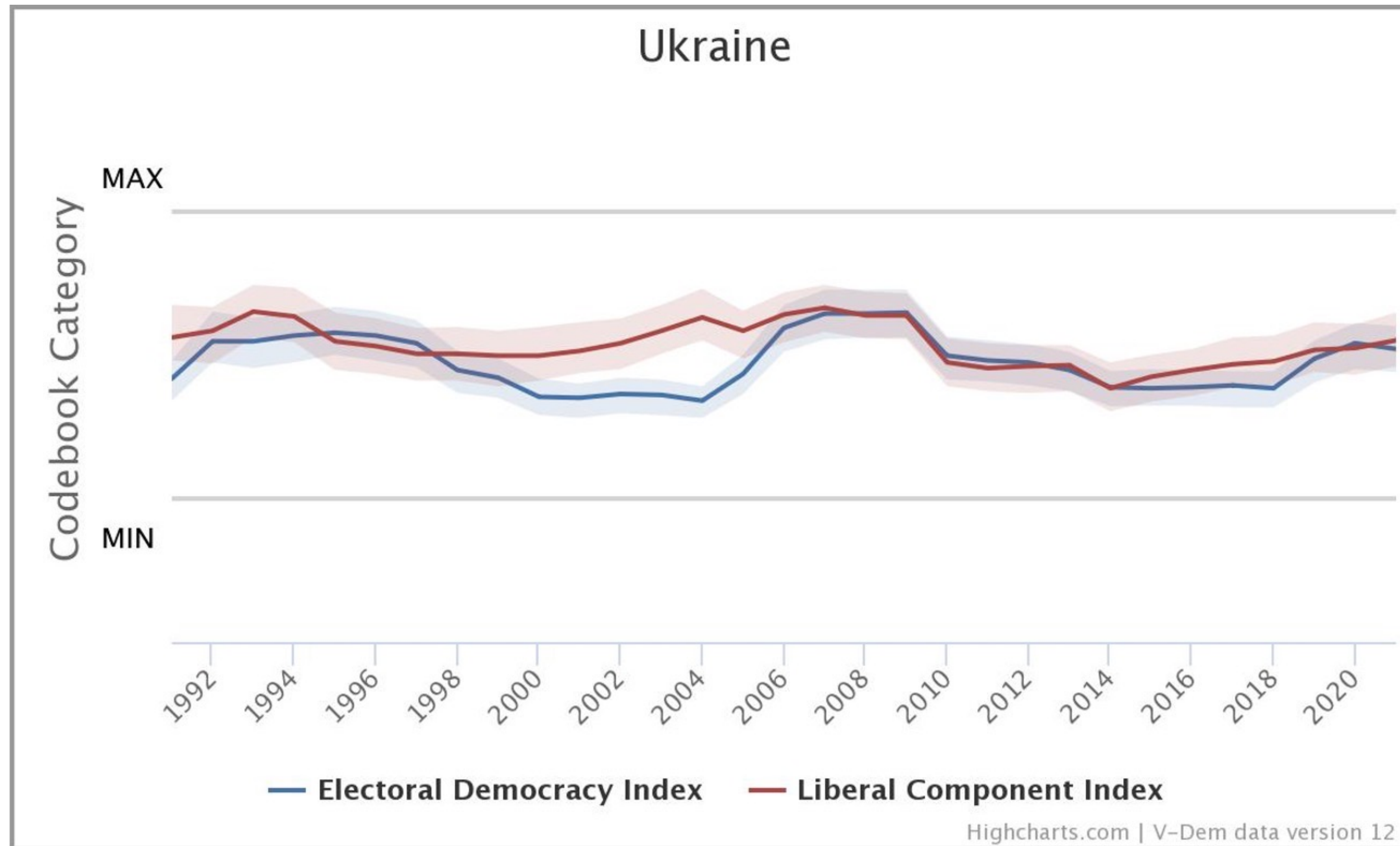


Was Ukraine a Democracy?

- Met *procedural requirements* for democracy most of the time (except 1999/2004 elections)
- But *major violations* of democratic principles *between elections*:
 1. Media censored and journalists harassed;
 2. Opposition leaders/parties pressured and persecuted;
 3. Judges and government officials used as political instruments;
 4. Citizens bribed or forced to vote for pro-government candidates.

Ukraine's "Hybrid Regime" Trajectory: 1992 - 2022

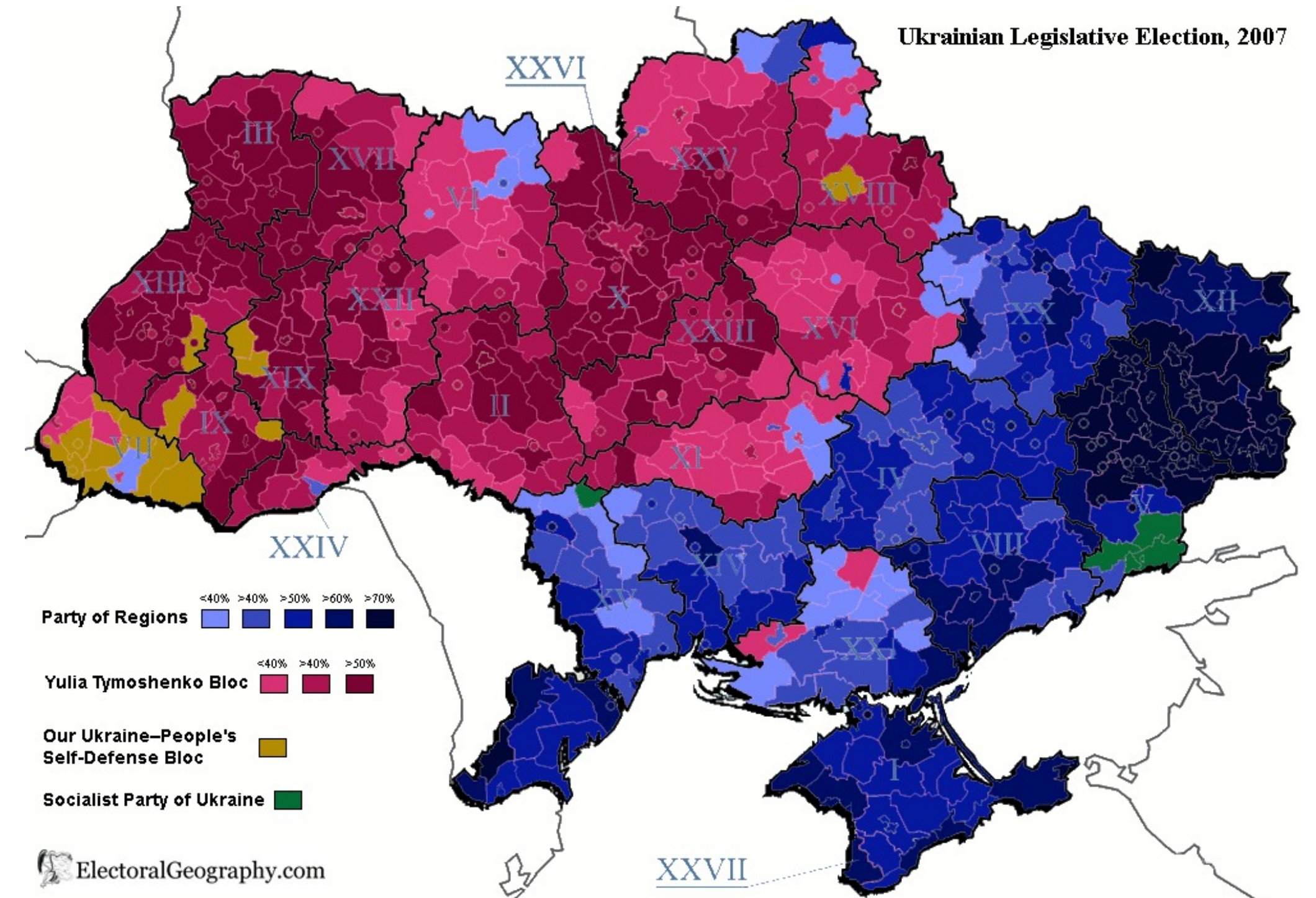
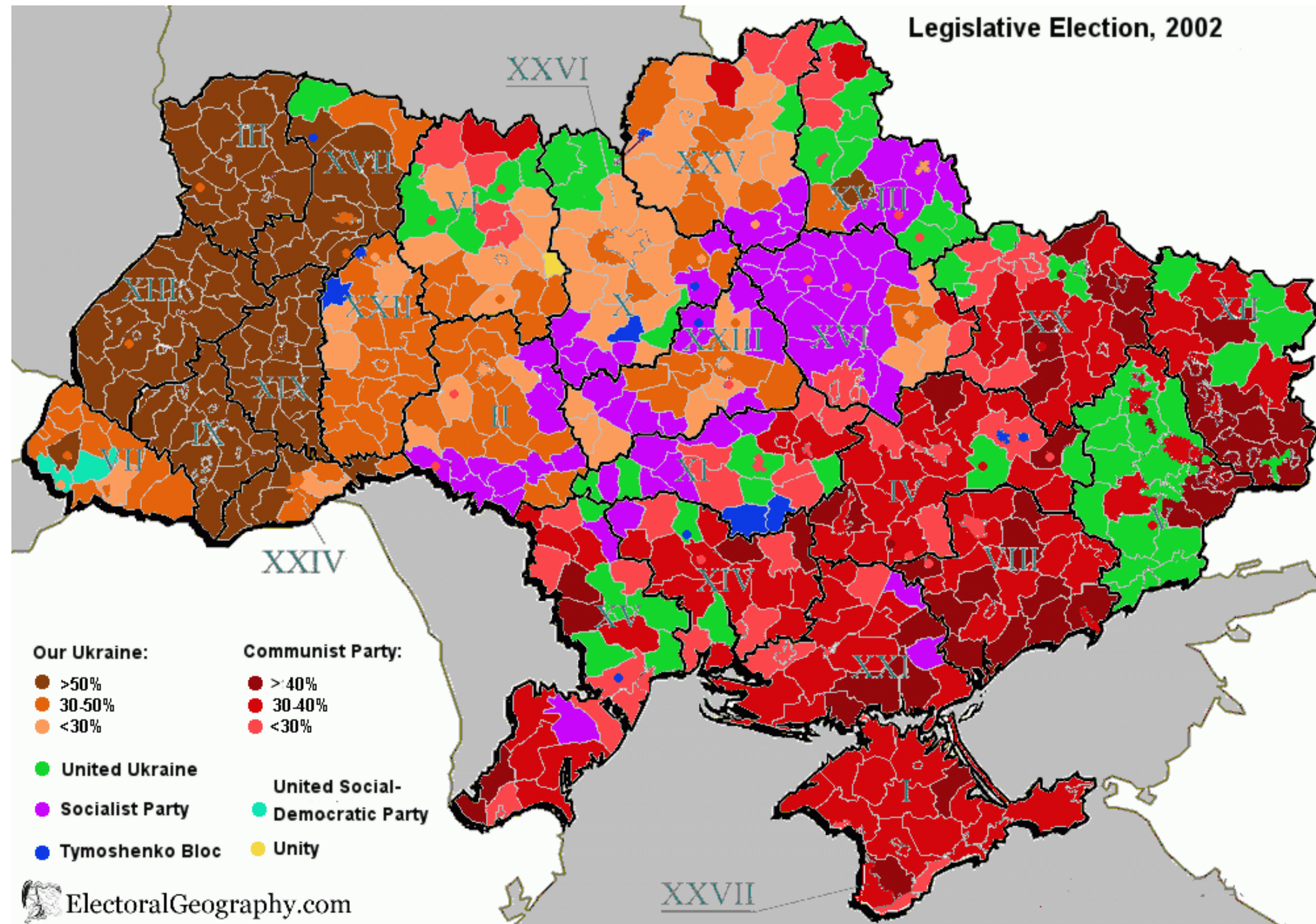
Source: V-Dem Dataset



Regionalism in Ukrainian Politics

- Allowed for political pluralism and prevented authoritarian consolidation (2004)
- But governance paralysis and dysfunction as a side-effect (2004 - 2010)
- Societal polarization and region-based mobilization (2004/2013-14)
- Major political parties turned into region-oriented political machines (more Belgium than Switzerland)

Parliamentary Elections: 2002 vs 2007



“Oligarchic Capitalism” and Ukrainian Politics

- Three paths for fast wealth accumulation: 1) banking; 2) metallurgy/coal; 3) energy trade
- Oligarchic coordination in 1999 election, but divided in all subsequent elections;
- Politics as a strategy of growing business and gaining competitive advantage
- Redistribution of wealth attempted, but never succeeded

Two Attempts of Authoritarian Consolidation

- 2003-04: Kuchma-Yanukovych presidential transition
- 2013-14: Yanukovych's presidential re-election strategy

Comparing Authoritarian Consolidation Attempts

- *Same Actors*: Putin, competing Ukrainian oligarchs and regional elites
- *Same Societal Response*: Protest mobilization and democratic revolution
- *Different Outcomes*: Peaceful Transition (2004) vs Violent Rupture (2014)

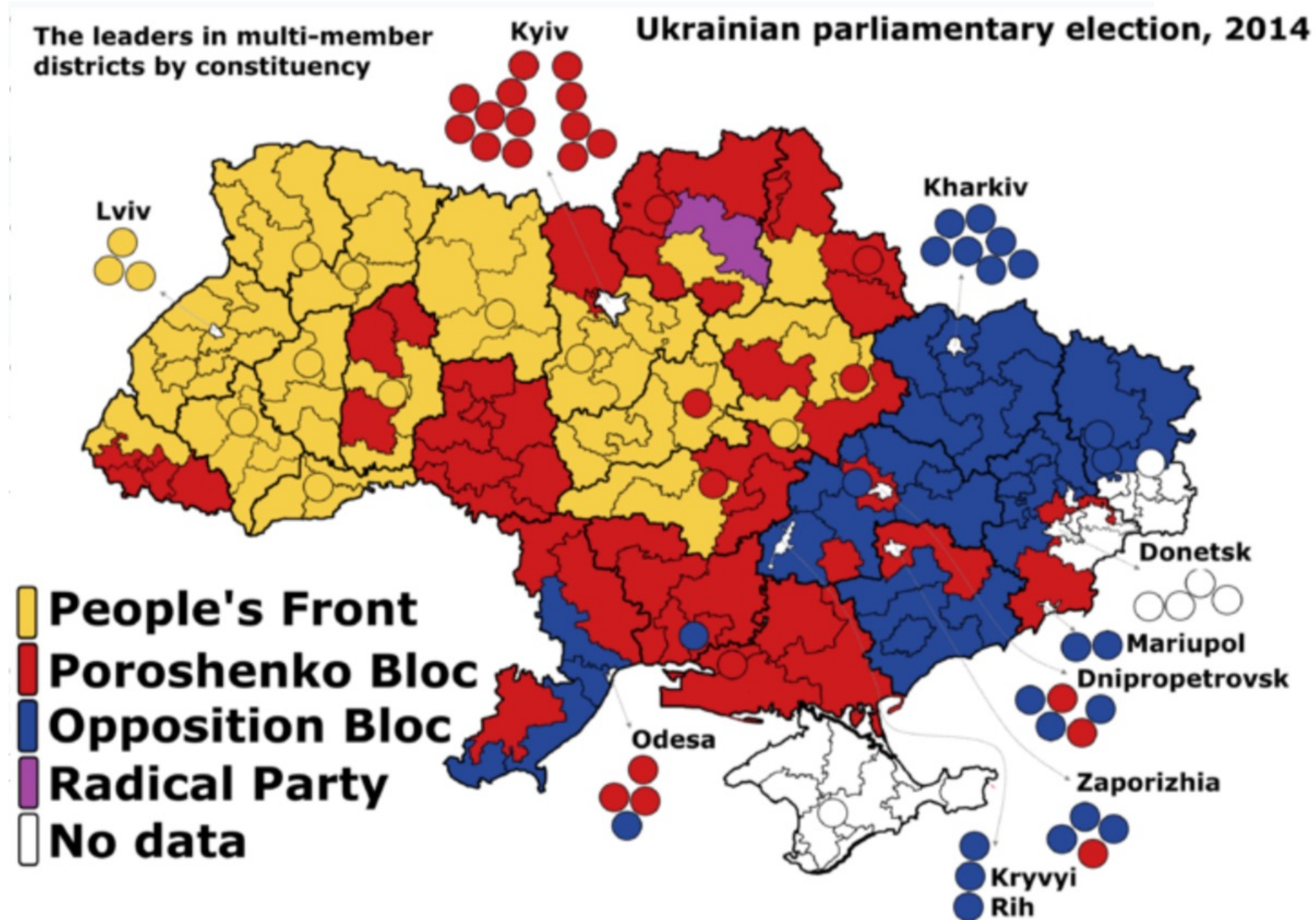
Euromaidan and 2014 Russian Invasion:

Why Rupture in Ukrainian Politics?

- Change in the composition of the electorate (loss of <3mln. of voters)
- Weakening of geocultural cleavage
- Major parties on all flanks fragmented (Batkivshyna) or disappear (KPU/PR)

Ukraine's 2014 Parliamentary Election Results

By winning party in each district



Donbas War and Ukrainian Politics

Internal Dimension

- Shift in political power to the center-right
- Policy agenda centered on ethnocentric nation-building (Ukrainian language/History/Church)
- Pro-Russian enclaves remain in major cities (Kharkiv/Odesa and Donbas), but more regional variation
- Empowered civil society (veteran and volunteer groups and Western-funded NGOs)

Donbas War and Ukrainian Politics

External Dimension

- Elite consensus on pro-Western foreign policy orientation in Ukraine
- Increased Western leverage over Kyiv with economic/military assistance
- Russia loses energy “blackmail” power
- Moscow maintains influence on public opinion through individual politicians (Medvedchuk) and affiliated media

Conflict Resolution in Donbas

Costs and Consequences

- Donbas Status as the key issue of Minsk talks: Autonomy vs Decentralization
- The costs of Donbas autonomy for Ukraine
- The benefits of Donbas autonomy for Russia
- Long-term “low-intensity” conflict as preferable for Ukraine and unacceptable for Russia

Views on the Future of Donbas

Political Elites and Society

- Public opinion divergence: civil war vs Russian aggression
- But majority aversion to any concessions to Moscow
- Elites polarized on conflict-resolution: compromise vs defiance

Two Presidential Elections: 2014 vs 2019

Logic Behind Victory

- One-round victory of Poroshenko (May 2014): alliance to prevent state collapse
- Two-round victory of Zelensky (March/April 2019): alliance to change the way the state is governed

Comparing 2014 and 2019 Presidential Elections

SIMILARITIES:

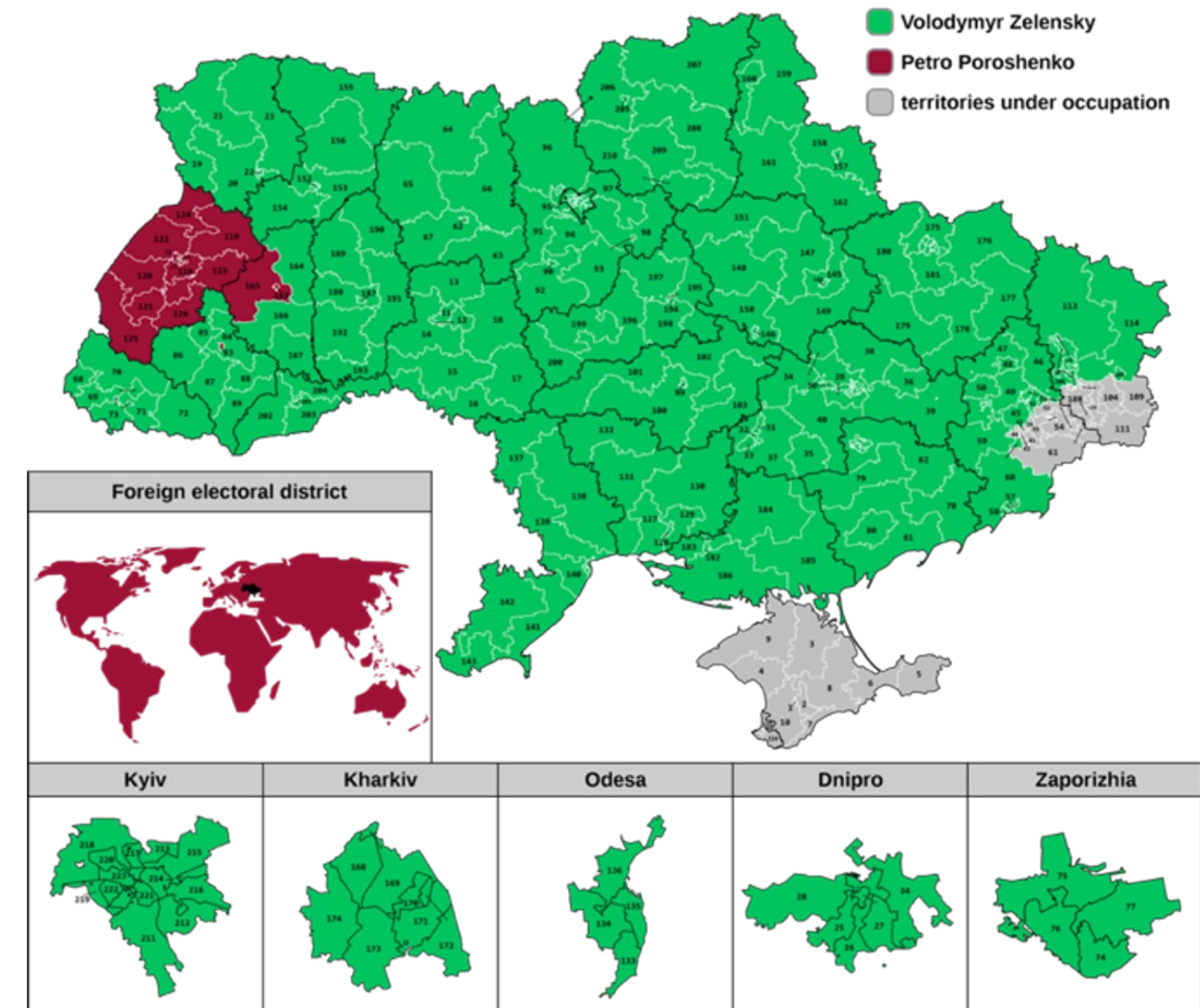
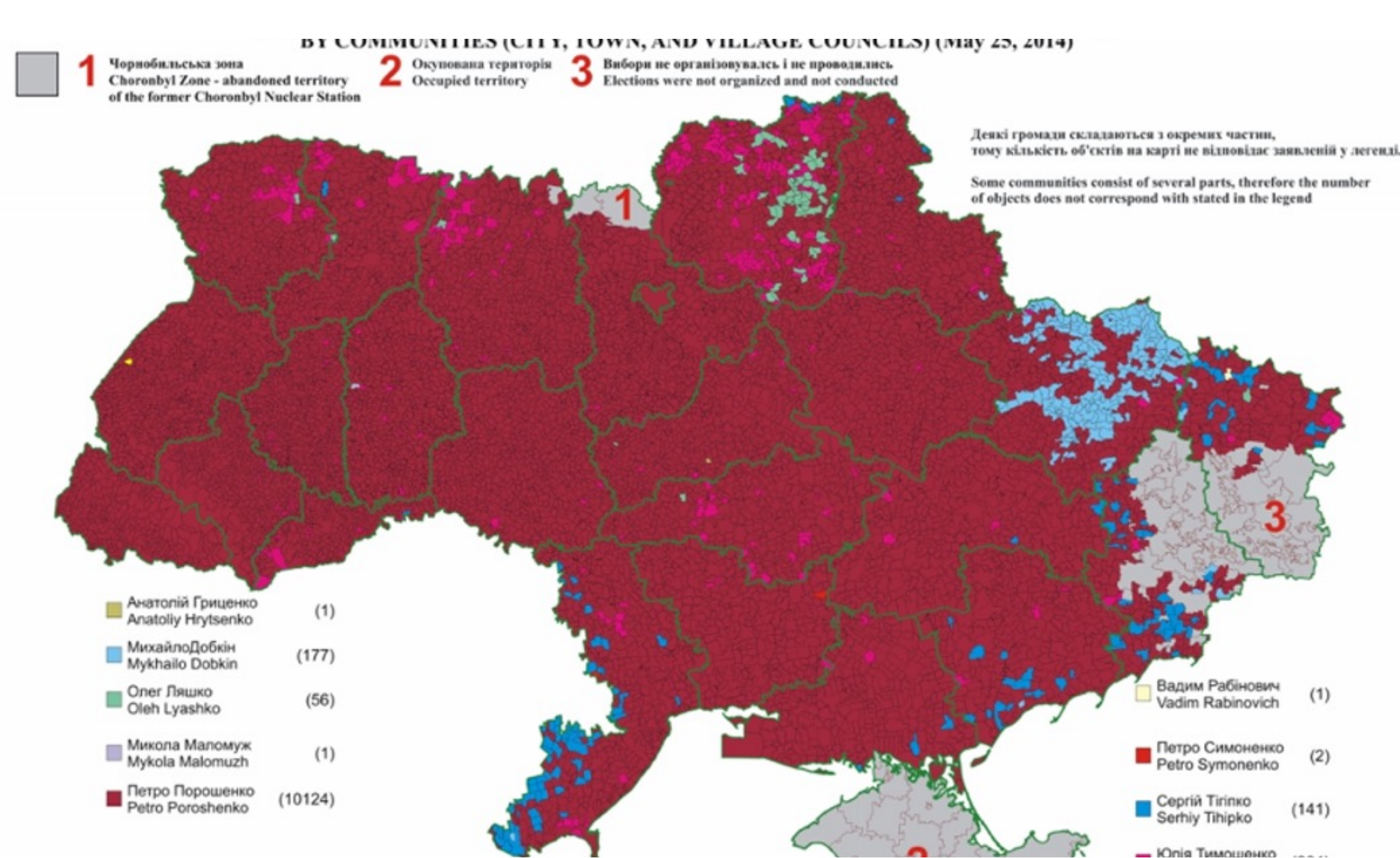
- Cross-regional support for the winning candidate
- Business background and oligarchic ties

DIFFERENCES:

- Strategic vs Protest voting
- Establishment vs Anti-Establishment candidate
- Old Elites vs New Generation

Presidential Election Results, 2014 and 2019

By district voting for the winning candidate

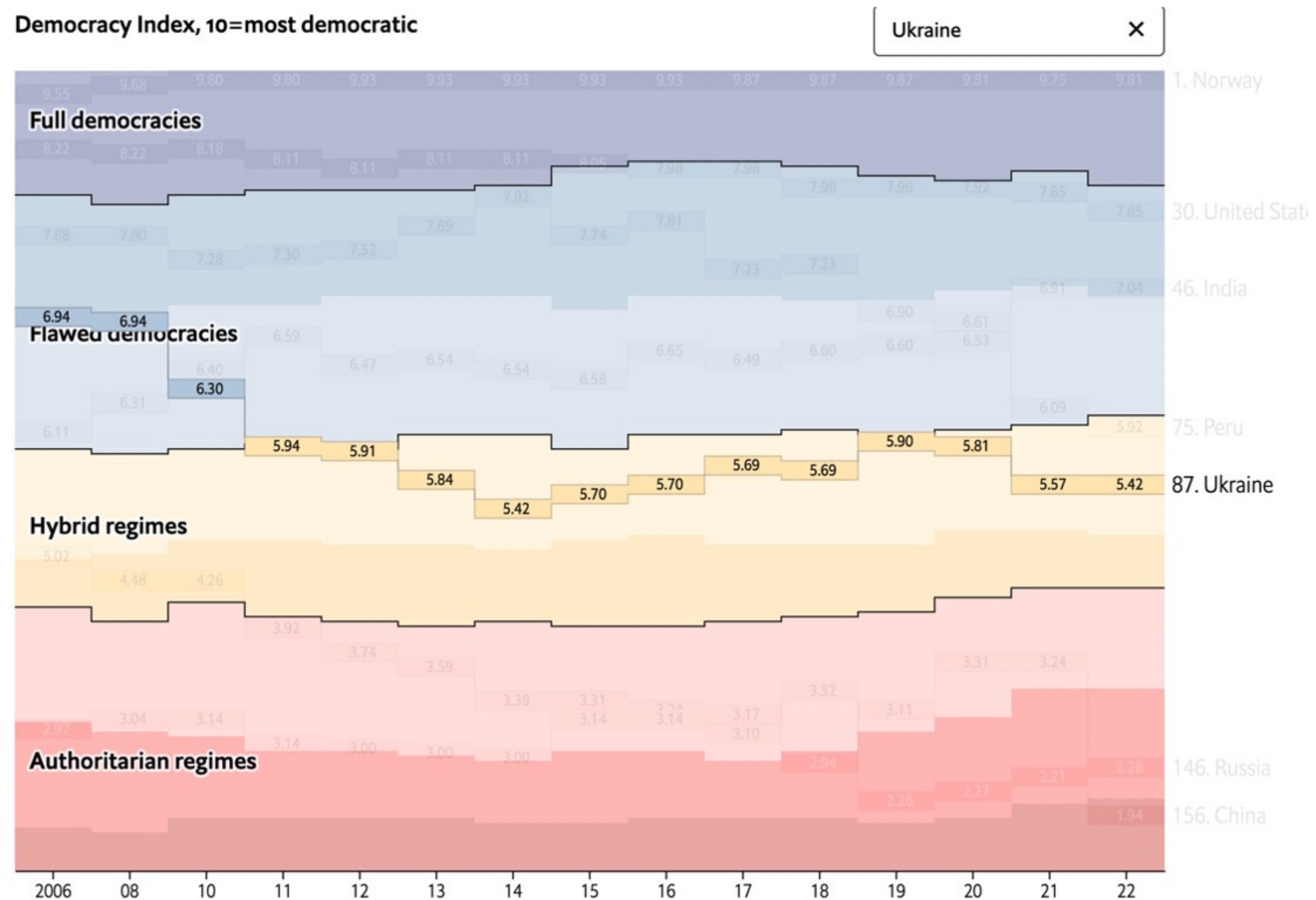


Poroshenko vs Zelensky: *Governance*

- Continuity on key aspects of nation-building project, but more consensus-building rhetoric from Zelensky
- More *institutional reforms* under Poroshenko, but more *operational changes* under Zelensky
- *Grand corruption persists*, but centered at the top under Poroshenko and on subordinate level under Zelensky
- More *power-sharing* under Poroshenko (several power centers); *hyper-centralization* under Zelensky

Ukraine's Democracy Performance, 2014-21

(Source: Economist Democracy Index)



Poroshenko vs Zelensky: Donbas Conflict

- **Poroshenko's approach:** strong anti-Russian rhetoric and Donbas blockade, but maintaining negotiation track (Minsk) and informal concessions to Putin
- **Zelensky's 2019 challenge to Poroshenko:** “negotiate with Putin and make a deal somewhere in the middle”
- **Zelensky's approach:** conciliatory rhetoric, but hardline approach to Minsk and rejection of compromises

Putin as Poroshenko's only rival

2019 Presidential Election
Campaign Poster



**“We are here... we
are defending
Ukraine.”**

**President Zelensky, Kyiv,
February 25, 2022**



Political Impact of the “Long War”

State

- Removal of institutional checks on the president
- Monopolization of policy agenda by a single political actor
- State dominance over the society
- Legitimacy no longer based on elections, but on the status of the “war-time leader”

Political Impact of the “Long War”

Society

- Displacement from the South/East = End of Old Regional Patterns
- Asset Loss/Trade Restrictions = End of Old Oligarchic Rule
- Constant Security Threat = Change in Public Trust Patterns
- Limitations on Civic Freedoms = Loss of Control Lever over the State

Long-term Impact of the War:

If Ukraine Wins

- Revival of democratic institutions is not guaranteed
- Prevalence of democratic values is not guaranteed
- Constitutional rights will likely be applied selectively
- Restorative justice demands and state repression
- Weak economic foundation for stable democracy

Long-term Political Impact of the War

If War Becomes a Stalemate

- Elections suspended indefinitely
- Presidency as the overpowering institution
- Severely restricted civil rights and liberties
- Will a “forever war” mean Zelensky as a “forever leader”?