

Ukraine: A Comedian in a Drama

Monday 29 April 2019, by [ISHCHENKO Volodymyr](#) (Date first published: 25 April 2019).

This article was first published in [Jacobin](#).

In Sunday's election Ukrainian voters dealt a decisive rebuttal to the post-Maidan establishment. Yet well-organized nationalist forces represent a time bomb under the new president-elect.

American readers won't be too surprised by a tale of an inexperienced candidate winning against the establishment's pick. But in the case of Ukraine's [new leader](#) Volodymyr Zelenskiy, this widely made comparison is even something of an understatement. Imagine that Donald Trump was thirty years younger and had never written any books or participated in any (even allegedly) serious debates. That there had been no primaries and no GOP to take over. And that the winner was a professional comedian.

But the comparisons with Trump have their limits. Zelenskiy, the son of a university professor and an engineer, is no working-class hero, but neither is he an oligarch like outgoing president (and defeated second-round candidate) [Petro Poroshenko](#), who made his fortune privatizing Soviet confectionery factories in the wild 1990s. The latter's aggressive nationalist campaign had far more in common with right-wing populists abroad, especially neighbors like Hungarian premier [Viktor Orbán](#) or de facto Polish leader Jarosław Kaczyński.

Poroshenko's main slogan was "Army. Language. Faith" and he raised the nationalist rallying cry "Either me, or Putin." In Sunday's second-round contest, a usually polarized society rallied in great numbers — 73 percent — against the incumbent. Zelenskiy won because he rode the wave of everything the unpopular incumbent symbolized to various kinds of voters. For them, Poroshenko meant poverty, unashamed corruption, the unending war in Donbass, and aggressive nationalist initiatives in policies stretching from religion to language and public history. During pre-election debates at Ukraine's largest stadium, Zelenskiy literally called himself "the result of [Poroshenko's] mistakes."

Yet the winning candidate had neither program nor party, simply adapting the name of his TV show *Servant of the People*. Zelenskiy arrives in office surrounded by "new faces" who might not be the real decision-makers. Worryingly, he has murky relations with notorious oligarch Ihor Kolomoiskyi, who siphoned billions from Ukraine to offshore funds. As a politician, the president-elect is uniquely shallow; one can only imagine how low Ukrainians valued Poroshenko's "achievements" and the developments of the five years since the Euromaidan uprising of 2014.

In this sense, the second round was a kind of referendum on Poroshenko, but also on the whole national-patriotic camp. The "national-liberal" intelligentsia and a large part of pro-Western "liberal" civil society aggressively rallied behind Poroshenko, attacking Zelenskiy and his voters as "pro-Russian," unpatriotic, treacherous, dumb, and uneducated. They said his victory would mark the end of Ukraine. Yet this Sunday we saw they represent barely a quarter of the country.

Five years after the Maidan uprising shook Ukraine, today we see that the political and intellectual

establishment which came to power in 2014 has ended up in bankruptcy.

A Referendum on the Post-Maidan Order?

The voters who elected Zelenskiy appear rather different from those whom enthusiastic Western media usually present as authentic representatives of Ukraine. Roughly speaking, we can say that his base doesn't like what the Russian government has been doing, but don't want to fight on to the bitter end either. They are probably pro-European but because of rather pragmatic reasons — the people to the west of Ukraine's borders live better than those to the east — and not because of the racist "civilizational choice" (for Europe, against Russia) promoted by Ukrainian intellectuals.

They prefer to speak in Ukrainian, or in Russian, or in mixture of both, but would laugh at the idea of making this into an ideological choice. They are tired of the confrontational atmosphere, the patriotic propaganda and constant search for "Russian agents" under the bed. They are indifferent both to the Soviet Union and to the fanatical "decommunization" of Soviet monuments and street names. They would rather be allowed to watch the banned Soviet movies, read Russian books, and chat on Russian social networks without restrictions. They do not like pretentious patriotism and radical nationalism. They expect from the government tangible improvement of living standards for the majority, not a "fight against corruption" for its own sake in the style of "liberal" civil society.

Since the 2014 Euromaidan protests, the extreme pro-Russian segment of Ukrainian public life has been repressed and marginalized. Over the last five years an extreme pro-Western and nationalist current had instead become hegemonic. Despite pro-democratic rhetoric the forces thus raised to power had in fact showed remarkable authoritarian tendencies.

First was the case of banning the Communist Party of Ukraine. This was a major opposition party, indeed perhaps the largest in terms of real membership, supported by 13 percent of voters in the 2012 parliamentary elections. Opposition politicians, media, journalists, and bloggers suffered state repression and radical nationalist violence. This stretched as far as pogroms, arson attacks, imprisonment of opponents, and fabricated criminal cases. So bad was the situation that the editor of the opposition's main online publication, Strana.ua, had to seek political asylum in Austria. At the same time, a paid army of pro-Poroshenko trolls produced a toxic atmosphere intolerant of dissent. A number of university lecturers were fired or attacked for their political positions and forced to leave the country.

The conflict with Russia was a key to this atmosphere. In December 2018, after a likely deliberate provocation in the Kerch Strait ending in the arrest of Ukrainian ships and sailors by the Russian Navy, then-president Poroshenko pushed through martial law across half of Ukraine's regions. There was no evidence of an escalating threat from Russia; but this was useful as a pretext for delaying elections and won some time for the beleaguered Poroshenko. According to polls, over 50 percent of Ukrainians said they would never vote for him under any circumstances. Prolonging martial law and even repeating the provocation in Kerch Strait were seriously discussed among Poroshenko's entourage, but such schemes failed to receive support from Western leaders, most notably Angela Merkel.

Poroshenko would, at least, make the second round of the election when it was ultimately held: in the first round on March 31 he edged out former premier Yulia Tymoshenko thanks to vote-buying and even outright fraud in certain districts. However, the United States and European Union were unwilling to let him force outright victory and an illegitimate reelection through such transparently deceitful methods, threatening to destabilize Ukraine. Local media reported that US diplomatic figures had assured Poroshenko he would not be prosecuted after he had lost power.

Within Ukrainian ruling circles his influence was also waning. Powerful interior minister Arsen Avakov positioned himself as an independent guarantor of free and fair elections, while the far-right National Corps Party, with connections to Avakov, led a disruptive campaign against the corruption of Poroshenko's close business partners. Most other oligarchs seemed to oppose Poroshenko's re-election, as was evident from reporting on the TV channels they own.

Ultimately, support for Zelenskiy was overwhelming. Many observers tended to underestimate the scale of opposition to the post-Maidan regime. Zelenskiy had a pro-EU and pro-NATO message and even called the very divisive radical nationalist leader Stepan Bandera "an undeniable hero." Yet if in the traditionally anti-Western regions in the south and east of Ukraine, who usually think of Bandera as a Nazi collaborator, upwards of 80 percent nonetheless voted for Zelenskiy, one can only imagine how much they wanted to get rid of Poroshenko. The margin of victory was nowhere near close enough for Poroshenko be able to rig the outcome.

In 2019, the peaceful transition of power, with Poroshenko's concession, was not a result of the strength of Ukrainian democracy but of Western dependency, oligarchic pluralism, and record-low support for the incumbent president in the second round. We still need to win democracy in Ukraine and, hopefully, Poroshenko's crushing defeat will open an opportunity for this.

A Chance for the Left?

As one leftist journalist commented, if you are not happy about Poroshenko's defeat, you have no heart; if you believe Zelenskiy's promises, you have no head.

At this moment, when so many things are still unknown about Zelenskiy, most predictions about his policies are hardly more than reading the tea leaves. His personal views, exposed in a handful of interviews, are not a coherent ideology but reflections of the libertarian dispositions of a successful showbiz figure who has not spent much time thinking seriously about political issues. Generally speaking, he is against excessive state interference in divisive issues regarding identity, the economy, and private life; and favors a less confrontational approach to the war in Donbass and Russia.

He supports joining NATO and steps toward EU membership but is also ready to communicate with and persuade those who oppose this. This is a break with those previously in power who despise (and have no problem alienating) this large minority in Ukrainian society. He is for some fiscal easing and, of course, like every politician in Eastern Europe, "against corruption." Zelenskiy has also spoken in favor of legalizing light drugs and sex work and against banning abortions, although these issues are on the periphery of political debates in Ukraine so far.

Yet it is still unknown how much his personal views are going to matter and how independent he will be as president. He was evidently supported by oligarch Ihor Kolomoiskyi and his popular TV channel, but the exact nature of the relationship and agreements between them is, perhaps, known to them alone. Kolomoiskyi may expect considerable compensation for the nationalization of Privatbank — the largest bank in Ukraine, which he previously owned — but such a move would be very unpopular and would surely discredit the new president. We do not know how much influence his present advisors are going to have and who Zelenskiy will assign to the governmental offices. At the same time, it is unknown who will form the core of Zelenskiy's party, or indeed, how he will relate to a parliament in which he has no faction of his own.

There are certain structural constraints that any Ukrainian president would have to confront, limiting the possibilities for progressive politics in Ukraine. However, as yet there are no serious grounds for the fears, expressed by some leftist observers, of a kind of neoliberal apocalypse under

Zelenskiy. In fact, if there is anything certain about Zelenskiy's rule, it is that economic policy is going to be decided by the balance of oligarchs' interests and IMF austerity requirements, just as it was under Poroshenko. Any radically alternative economic policy simply lacks any base in a significant political force.

Moreover, the rivalry between the oligarchs and the structure of Ukrainian civil society — where radical nationalists represent the strongest, best organized, and most mobilized segment, while the liberals are weak and the Left is almost nonexistent — will surely put limits on any attempt to move beyond the national-patriotic consensus. Such moves will be met with strong street opposition from the nationalists who are already whipping up fear about "Russian revanchism." And they may be supported by competing oligarchs, for example, if Poroshenko tries to consolidate national-patriotic opposition around him.

Nevertheless, the Ukrainian left does indeed now have a chance to become a stronger, more significant movement in the country's public life. Three undeniable results of Zelenskiy's victory benefit the Left.

Firstly, the escalation of repression and nationalist trends in recent years have forced a weak and stigmatized left into a semi-underground situation. But Zelenskiy's victory promises the end of the mounting authoritarianism we saw under Poroshenko. Even if Ukraine's political regime remains structurally unchanged and we see another oligarchic group (for example, Kolomoiskyi's) attempting to monopolize power, there is at least a temporary moment of relief.

Secondly, the hegemony of Ukrainian national-liberals who mostly consolidated around Poroshenko has been seriously challenged now. The crisis of their moral and intellectual leadership is already evident; more people now see the irrelevance of their vision for Ukraine and its future, which has been defied by the overwhelming majority. We are going to see many reflections on what has gone wrong raising interest and opening opportunities for alternative political tendencies, including the Left.

Finally, Zelenskiy's campaign brought into politics those groups who have never been interested in it or felt excluded since Maidan: primarily, young urban people in southeastern regions. Meanwhile, most of the comedian's voters do not expect much of him, except for not being Poroshenko. Faced with the inevitable disappointment at his rule, it can at least be hoped that many will not just return to their private lives, but will search for other, non-electoral forms of politics that can achieve deeper change.

It would be mistaken to have illusions about Zelenskiy's promise of a "new politics," breakthroughs in the campaign against corruption, peace in the Donbass, or a reversal of the gains the far right has seen in recent years. All this will, without doubt, take much more than getting rid of Poroshenko alone. However, the first step has been made — and the weakening of the outgoing regime opens up more opportunities for the future.

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