

The Ukrainian Presidential Elections

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What's behind the collapse of politics as usual?

Volodymyr Zelensky's stunning victory with 73 percent of the vote is an expression of deep public distrust in the political establishment.

The ruling elite usually divided the people of Ukraine into electorates of East and West. The government cultivated cultural and linguistic differences, adopting discriminatory language laws and pursuing similar cultural and educational policies. The Russian-speaking East was fuelled by fears of the "nationalist" West and vice versa: the Russian-speaking West and the Centre by fears of the "Russian threat". After 2014 this became the pillar of the Poroshenko regime, which won the elections as a conciliator (promising to end the war in two weeks) but by the end of his presidency had completely adapted to the right-conservative drift, campaigning on the slogan "Army, Language, Faith". This scheme failed.

One of the main reasons for this failure is the state of the economy. During his tenure prices for public utilities have increased several times. Heating costs grew by a factor of more than eight times. Meanwhile, real wages remained virtually unchanged between 2013–2018. Wage arrears more than doubled—up to 2.4 billion hryvnia (equivalent to 80 million euro, or 240,000 average monthly wages).

Many social subsidies targeting the general population, including child care payments for mothers, have been frozen or reduced. Unpopular reforms are under way in education, medicine, and pensions that destroy the remnants of the solidarity-based social security system. Protests against such reforms are suppressed with justifications like "there is a war in the country", and media that dare to talk about it are pressured as "pro-Russian". The deterioration of living conditions has led to an increase in labour migration, primarily to neighbouring Poland. But such an aggressive cultural and militaristic policy is no longer enough to justify the worsening socio-economic situation. Therefore, the majority of voters even in Western Ukraine voted for Zelensky, thereby rejecting Poroshenko's course.

Another reason is the war. Not only the electorate in general, which is critical of the EU and NATO, but even a significant portion of the so-called "pro-Western" constituency did not trust Poroshenko's policy in this area. And since a radical change in the electoral geography due to Russia's aggressive actions made it impossible for a "pro-Russian" candidate to win in modern Ukraine, "pro-Russian" voters were ready to vote for the most moderate of the "pro-Western" candidates.

Thus, Poroshenko's attempt to mobilize the electorate by exploiting their fear of Russia was defeated. He received substantial support only from the middle class in some large cities (primarily Kyiv) and one of the westernmost regions. On the other hand, Zelensky managed to mobilize young people and at the same time win the majority of voters in both the East and West of the country.

What Are Zelensky's Policies , and Will Meet Expectations?

Foreign Policy

The new president has already stated that he will continue active cooperation with the IMF. That means Ukraine will remain dependent on loans from international financial institutions, limiting the possible range of alternative economic policies.

Zelensky declared a “pro-Western” course. At the same time, he said that Ukraine is not expected to join the EU and NATO and that a referendum should be held on the strategic choice concerning these issues. Zelensky is ready to negotiate with Putin (and even prepared to call for a referendum on the subject), but at the same time he refuses to make concessions on key issues and is unlikely to decide on them because of the pressure exerted by the mobilized national-patriotic segment of society.

Domestic Policy

Ukraine’s oligarchs will continue to dominate the country. Zelensky is associated with the disgraced billionaire Kolomoysky, but it is difficult to predict how strong his influence will be.

The previous government’s course on unpopular social reforms and austerity is expected to continue. This is evidenced by Zelensky’s team and entourage, some of whom promoted the need for “painful reforms” at the beginning of Poroshenko’s tenure.

That said, we can expect a real decrease in nationalist rhetoric from the president in response to voters’ expectations. As for the Donbass war, the most that can be counted on is a de-escalation of the conflict. Zelensky promises to cease military actions and return to negotiations. There are plans to resume payments to pensioners who remain in uncontrolled territories. Under the current circumstances even steps like this constitute significant progress. Here, the outcome will depend on the degree of resistance to the peace process by the “war party”, as well as the role of Ukraine’s external partners.

Attempts to Hold On to the Previous Government

The majority of parliament supports Petro Poroshenko and is attempting to block changes to the political system—specifically, the snap parliamentary elections that President Zelensky wants to hold in July instead of October. The current parliament also wants to retain the mixed electoral system, in which 50 percent of MPs are elected by majority vote without party lists. The new president would probably not receive a majority in parliament through this system, as Poroshenko’s supporters will prevail among the majority vote candidates. A radical curtailment of the president’s competencies is also under discussion. But should Zelensky receive a parliamentary majority, the danger exists that state power will be overconsolidated around Zelensky and his entourage.

Recently, a “language law” was adopted that discriminates against Russian-speaking Ukrainians as well as members of other national minorities. In this way, Poroshenko and his party are trying to maintain a “pro-Western”, nationalist electorate.

Prospects for the Left?

With no illusions of improving the socio-economic situation in Ukraine, there is a chance to gain a window of opportunity for left-wing and other progressive forces.

The impunity enjoyed by the ultra-right when attacking left-wing and other activists will probably diminish. But that depends on how the leadership of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and the police will change, which is currently in doubt. After all, Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov, a

patron of the far-right Azov regiment, actually supported Zelensky in the second round and will thus retain his influence in the future. At the same time, a change in leadership at the SBU may reduce the attention of the intelligence services and stop the “cleansing” of the left-wing political field.

The majority of pro-Western intellectuals and “civil society” supported Poroshenko in the election, so his defeat also affects their hegemony in Ukraine. This may create conditions to expand the scope of pluralism in public debate, but only time will tell whether the Ukrainian Left will be able to take advantage of this.

All in all, it would be a mistake for leftists to have illusions in Zelensky’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. Achieving this will, without doubt, take much more than just getting rid of Poroshenko. However, the first step has been taken—and the weakening of the outgoing regime opens up more opportunities for the future.

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