

Ukraine election: stepping away from disaster

The Presidential election in Ukraine continued the popular rebellion sweeping Europe in recent years against brutal austerity—in the 2016 UK vote to leave the EU, the formation of an anti-EU government in Italy, and the Yellow Vests movement in France. In the first round, 31 March, actor Volodymyr Zelensky led a field of 39 candidates. His 30 per cent of the vote was nearly double the support for incumbent President Petro Poroshenko, who barely squeaked by former PM Yulia Tymoshenko to enter the second round, and would have been kept out of it had the leftist Opposition Bloc united behind a single candidate.

In the 21 April run-off, Zelensky vaporised Poroshenko, receiving 73.22 per cent to the latter's 24.45 per cent, with a 62 per cent turnout. The gap would have been even greater, but for the exclusion of 8 to 10 million voters. Several million people from the easternmost provinces, Lugansk and Donetsk (the Donbass), could not vote, either because they reside in areas that declared independence after the February 2014 coup in Kiev against elected President Victor Yanukovich, or because they are refugees from the Donbass war zone living elsewhere in Ukraine. At least 2.5 million Ukrainians have relocated to Russia since the Donbass civil war broke out in 2014, but the Kiev regime offered no voting precincts at its consulates there. For the 1.2 million or more Ukrainian labour migrants in Poland, only a handful of voting locations were opened. The Communist Party was not permitted to field a candidate, and Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine leader Dr Natalia Vitrenko, a two-time Presidential candidate who won 11 per cent of the vote in 1999, was barred from the election by illegal Justice Ministry stonewalling of the PSPU's official registration.

Even so, the outcome was a resounding rejection of the economic “reforms” of Poroshenko's five-year term, through which he sought to comply with International Monetary Fund conditionalities through ever stricter austerity. Household income peaked in 2013; average wages are down 22 per cent since then. Ukraine is now the poorest country in Europe. That didn't stop Kurt Volker, the US Envoy for Ukraine and former associate of the late war-hawk Sen. John McCain, from saying in a 4 April interview that Ukrainians should back Poroshenko for having “done more on reform than anyone else has in Ukraine for the past 20 years and stood up to Putin.”

The voters ignored Volker's meddling, and their vote was also a rejection of Poroshenko's pursuit of the Donbass civil war, in which 13,000 people have died. Zelensky has pledged to relaunch attempts to implement the 2015 Minsk II accords among Russia, Ukraine and the Donbass insurgent leaders, co-sponsored by France and Germany. He says that he wants to reach out to the Donbass population with humanitarian help; besides frequent shelling of residential areas by the Ukrainian Army, people there remain cut off from nationally disbursed services like old-age pensions.

Ukrainians are also disgusted by the rampant corruption still dominating the government and economy. Video footage posted by blogger Anatoli Shariy on 19 April after the sole debate between the candidates, showed people pouring out of the stadium where it was held, most of them ecstatic about Zelensky's obvious victory in the debate. Many said there was nothing but “lying” from Poroshenko. The YouTube subscriber list of Shariy, an anti-corruption fighter who has been in exile in Europe for eight years after a frame-up on false charges in Ukraine, jumped from 1.6 million to over 2 million in six months, as he video-blogged several times daily on the necessity of defeating Poroshenko.

Pitfalls ahead

Some commentators in the USA and UK, wedded to using Ukraine as a tool for military confrontation with Russia, joined Poroshenko in smearing Zelensky as “pro-Russian” or in the pocket of businessman and ex-Governor of Dnepropetrovsk Ihor Kolomoysky. Others depict him as a lightweight because he is a comedian. In reality, Zelensky has a law degree and comes from a family of Jewish intellectuals. His TV production company Kvartal 95 emerged from champion performances in famous comedy competitions called KVN (Club of Merry and Inventive People), of which sharp-witted repartee is the hallmark.

Vitrenko, in a pre-election video statement, warned that Ukraine would not survive a Poroshenko victory. She called on people to vote for Zelensky, and then hold him to the principle that is the name of his party, after the title of the TV series in which he starred as a teacher who unexpectedly becomes President—“Servant of the People”. After the election, Vitrenko publicly offered her help, as an economist, to the new President, outlining a range of ready-to-go policies to break with the IMF's demands, stop the drain of Ukraine's resources into the offshore bank accounts of the owners of privatised industries, and generate credit within Ukraine through banking reform that includes Glass-Steagall-type separation of bank lending from financial speculation.

As his policies are not fully spelled out, there will be a battle for the new President's ear. And it will be difficult for Zelensky to do anything quickly, since the Supreme Rada (Parliament) is dominated by radical nationalists elected in 2014. Already, Speaker Andriy Parubiy, the Euromaidan commandant implicated in the sniper shootings of 20 February 2014, engineered passage on 25 April of a long-debated tough law mandating the use of Ukrainian alone—not Russian, Hungarian, Romanian or other languages spoken in Ukraine—in many more settings than hitherto. Laws on language are the

perennial fuse for political and street clashes in Ukraine.

Parliament has approval/veto power over key ministerial appointments. Zelensky cannot dissolve the Rada until he is inaugurated, but the Rada sets the date of his inauguration and could put it less than six months before the 27 November Parliamentary elections, a period during which the Rada cannot be dissolved.

Poroshenko himself made ominous post-election statements. His concession speech on election night began with an invocation of Winston Churchill—a leader voted out of office who returned—for his dictum “Never surrender!” On the morning after, he appeared in front of his office for a campaign-style rally, organised by the Presidential Administration (i.e., by a government agency, not his campaign as such), whose personnel chanted “just one year”, implying that Poroshenko would be back well before Zelensky’s five-year term expires.

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