

Ukraine's upcoming presidential elections

The electoral campaign for the upcoming Ukrainian presidential elections on 31 March is now in full swing. Amidst difficult reforms that do not deliver on citizens' expectations of the Euromaidan protests, and a military conflict with Russia in Eastern Ukraine, candidates look for new ways to convince a weary and undecided electorate that immediate progress is still feasible. The contenders' views on conflict settlement and corruption will likely determine their odds at winning the presidency. The overall outcome, however, is highly unpredictable. Domestic elites as well as external actors may take advantage of the mood swings of Ukrainian citizens and the weak state institutions to sway election results in their favour.

Ukraine's pre-electoral mood

This year's elections are marked by deep fatigue. Ukrainians, despite seeing numerous domestic reforms adopted in the last five years, have not felt a major impact on their quality of life. Enjoying European-level living standards at home still seems an unattainable endeavour.

In a recent [poll](#) conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), 70 percent of Ukrainians consider that things in their country go in the wrong direction. This high, but fairly stable figure since the Groysman government took office in spring of 2016, will most likely reflect people's electoral choice this March. In addition, the fight against high-level corruption has yet to produce significant results. The war in Donbas seems far from reaching a sustainable resolution, and Western partners are not as engaged as many Ukrainians would have liked them to be.

The most pressing issues for Ukrainians are the ones that will impact their choice for presidency. At least two out of five Ukrainians are seriously concerned about the military conflict in Donbas (49%) and the corruption within state institutions (45%). Other important topics are the low industrial production (25%), price growth (24%), government incompetence (23%), and political instability (20%). Russian occupation of Crimea, surprisingly, is no longer a matter of key concern for most Ukrainians.

Main contenders

While 44 candidates are registered for the presidential race with the Central Election Commission, the bet is on three of them according to another recent [poll](#) released on February 14: Volodymyr Zelensky (26.9%), Petro Poroshenko (17.7%) and Yulia Tymoshenko (15.8%). With overall low popularity ratings, it is clear that there will be a second round that is scheduled for April 21.

Pro-Russian candidates who have registered are at a disadvantage for obvious reasons. By losing a sizeable voter base in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk, experiencing divisions within the Opposition Bloc, and difficulty to advocate for closer ties with a country that has violated the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the race will be led by pro-Western contenders.

With poll updates almost every week, this is clearly becoming a three-horse race. While the incumbent President Poroshenko and former Prime-Minister Tymoshenko are political survivors of Ukrainian politics, the comedian Zelensky is a novice on the political scene. With no previous experience in state institutions, only a month ago he arguably stood low winning chances. Considering, however, the disappointment of the Ukrainian electorate with the old establishment embodied by Tymoshenko and Poroshenko, as well as the dire demand for new faces in politics, Zelensky's odds are in fact considerable.

Stands on key issues

Considering that almost every second Ukrainian has [mentioned](#) the military conflict in Donbas and corruption as the main problems facing their country, contestants' views on these issues are likely to determine their odds at winning the elections.

Petro Poroshenko. The incumbent President consistently highlights the need to uphold the Minsk 2 agreement signed in February 2015, harshly criticizes the Kremlin for the deteriorating situation in Eastern Ukraine, and calls Western partners to impose more sanctions on Russia. He will likely maintain the same strategic course towards Euroatlantic integration as the only way to preserve the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine. In fighting graft, Poroshenko's odds are not very promising however. Despite the numerous anti-corruption institutions that have been created under his presidency, he is criticized for letting high-level political corruption go unpunished.

Yulia Tymoshenko. Unlike Poroshenko, Tymoshenko considers that the Minsk 2 agreement has low potential to achieve peace in Donbas. While hoping to restore and implement genuine security guarantees for Ukraine, the leader of the *Batkivchyna* (Fatherland) Party advocates the setup of a "Budapest+" political and diplomatic format that would include Ukraine, Russia, the U.S., France, Germany, China and a representative of the European Union. She expects this upgraded format to force the Russian military to withdraw from Donbas, and eventually from Crimea.

Other three key points in her [peace and security strategy](#) are not granting "special status" to the occupied Donetsk and Luhansk regions, making the West toughen sanctions on Kremlin, and requiring Russia to undertake legal responsibility for its aggression in Ukraine through financial compensation. Similar to Poroshenko, Tymoshenko's image as a corruption fighter is not in good standing mainly due to her non-transparent gas deals in the 1990s and current campaign financing.

Volodymyr Zelensky. Of the three candidates, Zelensky is the dark horse in this election. The details of his foreign policy for Ukraine are still to be determined. Without the political background and experience of the other two candidates, it is hard to foresee his intended actions. In a recent [TV interview](#), he mentioned that Ukrainians will have to achieve an agreement with Russia over Donbas, as an outright military confrontation is not the solution he envisions. Zelensky is also not excluding the need to hold a referendum to decide on the conflict settlement.

Zelensky's connections to oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi seem not to affect his ratings. In addition, his lack of political experience plays both to and against his advantage. He will most likely embody the protest vote that many Ukrainians are eager to cast against the corrupt establishment, and the vote of the younger generation who has had enough of the Old Guard and longs for new elites. Concurrently, the political and economic context of Ukraine requires a strong political acumen that arguably comes with more experience than what Zelensky's team can offer.

What to watch out for

The voters' participation and their preferences in this election are highly unpredictable. Only 32 percent of Ukrainians are sure to vote. Reasons for this reluctance are manifold. First, there is lack of credible political candidates and new faces in the Ukrainian politics. Second, main contenders offer somewhat similar stances, but no clear vision on what an actual governing agenda could look like. While the devil is in the details, there is increased societal fatigue and uncertainty that impedes the electorate to engage more qualitatively with candidates' electoral programs. In addition, three out of five Ukrainians believe that the elections will "somewhat not" or "not be" free and fair. Lastly, with less than two months ahead of elections, 27 percent of Ukrainians [do not know](#) who they would vote for were elections to be held next Sunday. This volatility creates space for potential last-minute manoeuvres such as vote-buying, and vote-count rigging.

Besides the uncertainty that lies with the voters, the polling predictions are likely to be misleading as well. Surveys in Ukraine are generally unreliable. Considering increased fake polling typically around elections, which

is aimed at manipulating the electorate's and international opinion, local experts recommend consulting only the ones published by Kucheriv Fund/Razumkov Centre, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, and IRI.

Lastly, it is likely that Russia will not miss the opportunity to intervene in swaying the outcome of this election, considering its high stakes in Ukraine. From trolling, bots, and cyber-attacks to Russian-backed oligarchs, and intensified fighting in eastern Ukraine, all represent available instruments in Russia's toolbox that could be activated when deemed necessary.

Conclusions

On the background of very low popularity rankings of all presidential candidates the outcome of elections is highly unpredictable. What is certain, however, is that Ukrainians still expect significant qualitative change to their daily lives commensurate to their European counterparts, and a sustainable settlement for Donbas. It remains unclear who can deliver the Ukrainian dream, but disillusionment with the pace of the reform process, the lack of settlement prospects for the Donbas conflict, the unpunished high-level corruption, and the still monopolized key sectors of the economy will likely define who wins the presidential race.

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