

Ukraine: The new president calls for snap elections, but will they change anything?

On 20 May 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyi was sworn in as Ukraine's 6th president. Zelenskyi – a popular comedian, actor and businessman – had won the election by a landslide: he got 73 per cent of the votes against the incumbent president, Petro Poroshenko, in the second round of the presidential elections on 21 April. Zelenskyi has no relevant experience in politics, unless one includes his playing the role of president in the TV comedy show, 'Servant of the People', the story of a humble history teacher who becomes the president of Ukraine by mistake. In the coming months, the new president, working with a similarly inexperienced team, will have an uphill battle fulfilling his election promises of fighting corruption and negotiating with Russia on peace in Donbas.

Ukraine is a parliamentary-presidential republic, where the president needs to be backed by a majority in parliament. Therefore, in his inauguration speech, Zelenskyi dissolved the parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, and called for snap elections. Instead of the originally scheduled elections on 27 October, Ukrainians will elect a new parliament on 21 July. The presidential decree was initially met with criticism from many parliamentarians, but the parties later accepted it.

A recent poll by Rating Group gives the new president's recently-created party, 'Servant of the People' (the same name as his TV show), a large lead in support, from 47.5 per cent of those polled, followed by the pro-Russian party, 'Opposition Platform – For Life' (10.4%), and, in third place, Poroshenko's 'European Solidarity Party' (7.9%); the latter is a re-branded version of its leader's 'Petro Poroshenko Bloc', the largest party in the current Rada. Two other parties – 'Fatherland' of ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko (7.5%) and 'The Voice', the party of rock star Svyatoslav Vakarchuk (6.4%) – are also expected to be able to cross the five-percent barrier to the parliament. Thus, Zelenskyi's chances of securing a pro-presidential majority in the coming Rada seem quite good.

Parallel with the inauguration, Zelenskyi appointed members of his administration. Most of the appointees come from a small circle of friends and business partners lacking expertise in affairs of the state, presumably chosen because Zelenskyi trusts them, not for their experience in governing. Most of them have worked with Zelenskyi's production company, Kwartal 95, and in his election campaign. Some of them are from the new president's birth place, Kryvyi Rih, and have even longer personal or business connections to him. One of his team's few members with government experience is Oleksandr Danilyuk, who was finance minister until 2018, when he was sacked from the government. Surprisingly, however, Zelenskyi appointed Danilyuk to the post of secretary of the National Defence and Security Council, where his experience of conducting radical economic reform will not be used.

Perhaps the most controversial appointee was Andrii Bohdan, the new head of the Presidential Administration. Bohdan served as a deputy minister in the government during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, who was ousted in the Euromaidan revolution of February 2014. According to the lustration law, which was adopted after the revolution, Bohdan should have been banned from public office for 10 years, but because of changes in the description of the Presidential Administration, in his new position he is no longer considered a public employee.

Bohdan also served as lawyer to Ihor Kolomoyskyi, the oligarch who was the alleged sponsor of Zelenskyi's election campaign and the owner of the 1+1 TV channel, the host of Zelenskyi's shows. The connection to Kolomoyskyi is a weak spot for the new president. Just before the inauguration, Kolomoyskyi returned from a self-imposed exile in Switzerland and Israel, where he had spent the last few years following a schism with Poroshenko. In December 2016, Kolomoyskyi's bank, Pryvatbank, was nationalized as part of a clean-up of the banking system, supported by the International Mone-

tary Fund. Kolomoyskyi is now battling in the courts to establish that the transfer of the bank was illegal.

There seems to be a trend, after Zelenskyi's election, wherein "the old guard is coming back" to Ukraine. Some of those who were influential before the revolution, such as two top civil servants from the Yanykovich era – the former head of the Security Service of Ukraine, Valerii Khoroshkovskiy, and the former head of the Presidential Administration, Andrii Portnov – have also returned after several years in exile. That such people return and feel safe to re-establish their often corrupt business schemes under Zelenskyi does not bode well for Zelenskyi's election campaign promise to fight corruption.

Another of Zelenskyi's election promises was to negotiate with Russia on peace in Donbas. Likewise, this seems difficult to achieve. President Vladimir Putin refused to congratulate Zelenskyi on his victory. The new Ukrainian president's background as a Russian-speaking Jew does not fit with Russia's propaganda that Ukraine is being run by a 'fascist junta', which builds on anti-Semitic and anti-Russian sentiments. For the Kremlin, there is also the risk that the process that brought Zelenskyi to power – his overwhelming election win and the incumbent's peaceful departure – could appear attractive to Russian voters. Ukraine once again demonstrated its ability to hold democratic elections, in stark contrast to Russia.

The Russian leadership has decided not to give the new Ukrainian president a honeymoon start. On 24 May, Putin issued a decree that inhabitants of the Ukrainian, pro-Russian separatist, 'People's Republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk, would have a fast-track to Russian passports. This move, which imitates Russian policy in the Georgian separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, could also be used as a pretext for open military intervention in order to save 'Russian citizens'. Further, on 1 June, Russia banned export of crude oil, petroleum products, and coal to Ukraine, after a decision taken by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, three days before the Ukrainian elections. Russia also prolonged the detention without trial of the 24 Ukrainian sailors captured in the Kerch Strait on 25 November 2018.

Zelenskyi has been vague, both during the election campaign and as president, on how to negotiate peace

with Russia. His claim that a potential agreement with Putin on solving the situation would be put to a referendum has been slandered by critics as naïve. In his inauguration speech, he did not mention Russia even once, let alone blame it for aggression against Ukraine. Instead, he focused on reconciliation and the need to embrace the diversity of Ukraine and win hearts and minds in Donbas and Crimea. During his visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels on 4 June, Zelenskyi repeated, 'We are ready to negotiate with Russia. We are ready to implement the Minsk agreement'. But any concession on special status of the separatist territories would generate public discontent and portray Zelenskyi as a traitor of the Ukrainian nation. Furthermore, nothing points to Russia's wanting peace in Donbas; but, rather, to maintaining the status quo. The conflict is convenient for Moscow, as it keeps Kyiv busy and Ukraine out of NATO.

Nevertheless, polls also show that Ukrainians are tired of the war in Donbas, while an increasing number of Ukrainians are more positive towards Russia. The situation in Ukraine, therefore, is similar to the one in Georgia in 2012, when 'the Georgian Dream' Party was brought to power with promises that a rapprochement with Russia could improve the country's economy and lead to resolution of the conflict. For the moment, Moscow seems to have adopted a wait-and-see-attitude towards Zelenskyi, which will probably extend over the snap parliamentary elections. Moscow is not testing his administration's inexperience by escalating the conflict; such a move would put at risk the expected improvement in the snap-election results of the 'pro-Russian' parties. After the elections, Moscow will probably expect either real concessions from Zelenskyi, backed by a pro-presidential majority in the parliament, or, failing that, the possibility of escalation in Donbas.

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