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# Petro Poroshenko is the favourite for the presidential elections in Ukraine

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On 30 March the nominations for candidates in the early presidential elections in Ukraine were closed. 46 people submitted applications; the Central Electoral Commission will announce the final list of candidates on 4 April. After Vitaly Klitschko's unexpected withdrawal from the elections, the undisputed favourite is now Petro Poroshenko, who had previously had a significant advantage over his potential rivals in the polls. His main rival is Yulia Tymoshenko, while the Party of Regions was unable to put forward a strong candidate, and has *de facto* abandoned the fight for victory. For the first time in the presidential elections there will be no rivalry between 'eastern' or 'western', or 'democratic' and 'pro-Russian' candidates. The main contenders are from the same political camp and, to varying degrees, can count on support throughout the country.

## Major candidates

A few weeks ago it seemed that the new government camp would put forward three strong candidates: Vitaly Klitschko, Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko. However, the results of a survey carried out by the four most authoritative Ukrainian public opinion research centres and announced on 26 March, gave Poroshenko a lead of over ten points in the first round and foresaw a landslide victory in the second round against any opponent. Although the survey was preliminary, it nevertheless confirmed a huge increase in Poroshenko's popularity in recent months. Consequently Klitschko withdrew from the race, and his party supported Poroshenko, who has thus became the favourite to win the elections, as at the start of the campaign he leads his main competitors by over twenty percent. He could even win in the first round, although it is more likely that on 15 June he will face off against Yulia Tymoshenko in the second round.

Klitschko's decision probably resulted from a sober analysis of the situation, including a significant decline in his own popularity, as well as the awareness that he has not met one of the formal conditions for a candidate: a ten-year residency in Ukraine. Klitschko has also probably decided to return to the policy goal he had already set himself: winning office as the mayor of Kyiv. (He had been pushed towards the presidency over several years by his associates.) It is very likely he will win the municipal elections in Kyiv (which are also set for 25 May).

Klitschko's support gives Poroshenko the thing he most needed: a party structure to organise the election campaign. Poroshenko's own party *Solidarnist* [Solidarity] is a semi-

virtual entity, whereas Klitschko's *UDAR* has well-developed branches and numerous activists throughout the country, which will now work for a win for Poroshenko. Poroshenko himself, an experienced politician and a successful entrepreneur (Forbes valued his fortune at US$1 billion), will also be able to take advantage of his role on the Maidan, where he was one of the real leaders. The leaders of the opposition marginalised him, and he did not participate in the talks with Yanukovych, which cast a shadow on the popularity of Yatsenyuk, Klitschko and Tiahnybok. On the other hand, it is highly likely that Poroshenko's candidacy is secretly being supported by Dmytro Firtash, who had previously sponsored *UDAR*.

Yulia Tymoshenko has also declared her candidacy, although some of *Batkivshchyna*'s leadership had discouraged her from running in the elections. Were the former Prime Minister to do so, however, it would be tantamount to the end of her political career. Besides, only strong support in the elections can ensure she recovers full control over the party, which during her incarceration brought forth new leaders and new interest groups.

The only serious candidate associated with the former Yanukovych camp is Serhiy Tihipko, who sought the support of the Party of Regions. Not having received it, he decided to stand alone, and will probably bring his supporters out of the party to create his own. However he has no chance of reaching the second round.

The Party of Regions itself was unable to put forward a strong candidate: Mikhail Dobkin's candidacy is perhaps the only way to preserve the unity of the Donetsk and Kharkiv centres of the party. At least three Party of Regions politicians have decided to declare their own candidacies independently (although perhaps not all of them will be registered). The divisions within the Party of Regions will work in favour of the Communist candidate, a position Petro Symonenko has filled since 1999. He may aspire to third or fourth place, in competition with with Tihipko.

The other candidates, some of whom are leaders of minor parties, others overly ambitious individuals or joke candidates (such as the Internet Party of Ukraine's candidate, the Odessa-based Darth Oleksiyovych Vader) have no chance. Some of them, however, (especially the leaders of the nationalist right, Oleh Tiahnybok, Dmytro Yarosh and Vasyl Kuybida) are playing for the positions of their parties in the parliamentary and municipal elections.

## The start of the campaign

For the first time in the Ukrainian presidential elections, there will be no opposition between 'democratic – pro-Western' and 'oligarchic – pro-Russian' candidates, or between individuals identified with the west and east of Ukraine. The leading candidates come from the East (Poroshenko is from the Odessa district), are connected with oligarchic business, are pro-Western in their orientation, and favour replacing authoritarian agendas with democratic processes. The trio will also compete for the electorate in all Ukraine's regions, although Tihipko has little to gain from the west, and nor does Tymoshenko in the Donbas.

In this situation it is difficult to talk about a clash of party programmes, the more so as the country's situation is forcing the leading candidates to declare similar, patriotic, anti-Russian slogans. The victor will thus be decided by the charisma and energy of their campaign. In

this respect, the bland figure of Tihipko is in a losing position; however, it remains to be seen how much Yulia Tymoshenko has retained of her old charisma, as well as the extent to which Ukrainian voters are still respondent to her image as a 'Ukrainian Joan of Arc', and how many will prefer the image of the 'benevolent father', of which Poroshenko seems to be the perfect incarnation.

Poroshenko and Tymoshenko have announced that they will not lead campaigns of 'all-out war', by which we should understand attempts to discredit their opponent. Whether they will persevere in this attitude remains an open question, especially given Yulia Tymoshenko's emotional attitude to politics and her tendency to demagoguery, as well as her personal hostility towards Poroshenko. The marginal radicals, especially the nationalists, may also contribute elements of 'black propaganda' to the campaign.

The fact that the Party of Regions and the Communists have each put forward their own candidates means their rejection of Russian demands to postpone the presidential election. Apparently, both parties have decided that boycotting these elections would pose a threat to their continued existence. On the other hand, there is no strong candidate whom Moscow could openly support. We can thus expect that the Russian media intervention during the election campaign will be aimed at discrediting the Ukrainian political class, questioning the legality of the election, and later also the integrity of the results. Nor can it be ruled out that Russia will take actions aimed at preventing the elections from being held.

## Appendix

### The main candidates in the presidential election

**Petro Poroshenko** (born 1965 in Bolgrad, Odessa region); former Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine (2004) and Foreign Minister (2009-2010). A big entrepreneur (oligarch), mainly associated with Russian markets. The seventh richest Ukrainian in 2012. One of the sponsors and leaders of the Maidan. Standing on his own initiative, with support from the *UDAR* party. The clear favourite.

**Yulia Tymoshenko** (born 1960 in Dnipropetrovsk), former Prime Minister of Ukraine (2005, 2007-2010), previously a successful entrepreneur (one of the oligarchs) in the trade of natural gas. Imprisoned 2011-2014. The candidate of the *Batkivshchyna* party, and the only candidate able to compete with Poroshenko.

**Serhiy Tihipko** (born 1960 in Moldova), since his studies linked to Dnipropetrovsk; former president of the National Bank of Ukraine (2002-2004), Minister of Economy (1999-2000) and Deputy Prime Minister (2010-2012); a member of the Party of Regions, although standing on his own initiative, without the support of the party. The ninth richest Ukrainian in 2012. A good result in the election would probably be the starting point for him to build his own political party.

**Mikhailo Dobkin** (born 1970 in Kharkiv), former mayor of Kharkiv (2006-2010) and head of the Kharkiv regional administration (2010-2014). The candidate of the Party of Regions.

**Petro Symonenko** (born 1952 in Donetsk), since 1993 the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine.

**Yuriy Boyko** (born in 1958 in Horlovka, Donetsk region), former director of the Naftogaz Ukrainy state company (2002-2005), Minister for Energy (2006, 2010-2012) and Deputy Prime Minister (2012-2014). Member of the Party of Regions, standing on his own initiative, without the support of the party. He is considered a lobbyist for Gazprom's interests in Ukraine.

**Oleh Tsariov** (born 1970 in Dnipropetrovsk), businessman and politician from the Party of Regions, standing on his own initiative, without the support of the party. Russophile.

**Oleh Tiahnybok** (born 1968 in Lviv), leader of the *Svoboda* party and its official candidate. A leading representative of Ukrainian radical nationalism. His participation is primarily intended to boost the party's fortunes.

**Oleh Lashko** (born 1972 in Chernihiv), journalist, muckraker, former deputy with *Batkivshchyna*. The candidate of the Oleh Lashko Radical Party. He has no chance of winning, although because of his radicalism and demagoguery he could play a big role in the election campaign.

**Vadym Rabinovych** (born 1953 in Kharkiv), a big Israeli-Ukrainian businessman, active in the media, among other interests. Has both Ukrainian and Israeli citizenship. Chairman of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, Vice-President of the European Jewish Union. Until now he had not been involved in politics. The reasons for his participation in the elections is unclear; he has stated that he wants to prove that Ukraine is not an anti-Semitic country.

**Mykola Malomuzh** (born 1955 in the Cherkassy region), officer of the KGB and SBU, head of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine in 2005-2010, holds the rank of general. His participation in the campaign may involve circulating compromising materials about the leading candidates.

**Vasyl Kuybida** (born 1958 in Komi, in a family of deportees), former mayor of Lviv and the Minister for Regional Development. Moderate nationalist. President of the People's Movement of Ukraine and its official candidate. His participation in the elections is a preparation for the struggle for power in Lviv during the expected early municipal elections.

**Olha Bohomolets** (born 1966 in Kyiv), a prominent doctor, well-known social activist and singer. Gained political support as the organizer of the health service in the Kyiv Maidan.

**Anatoly Hrytsenko** (born 1957 in Cherkassy oblast), a former army officer (colonel) and defence minister. His wife is the leading Ukrainian political journalist Yulia Mostova. Candidate of the Civic Platform. We may expect him to attack Tymoshenko relentlessly.

**Dmytro Yarosh** (born 1971 in Dniprodzerzhynsk), since 1994 a member of the leadership of the paramilitary, radical nationalist organization *Tryzub Stepan Bandera*, and an organiser of the Maidan's Right Sector, who then initiated its transformation into a political party. Standing on his own initiative, without support of the party.