

Zelenskiy: a comedian joins the race for the presidency of Ukraine

Tadeusz Iwański

30 December 2018 saw the official launch of the campaign for Ukraine's presidential elections scheduled for 31 March. Candidates can submit their documents to the Central Electoral Commission by 4 February. So far, several candidates have publicly announced their intention to run for the highest office in the land, including Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who is currently running second in the pre-election polls. He announced his candidacy on the 1+1 TV channel, which belongs to Ihor Kolomoyskiy, an oligarch who is in conflict with President Petro Poroshenko.

Zelenskiy is a well-known actor, comedian and film & television producer in Ukraine. His Studiya Kvartal-95 company makes television series, films and cabaret shows for 1+1, and stars in the lead role in the latter. Since 2015 he has played the part of the President of Ukraine in the popular TV series *Servant of the People*, wherein he is portrayed as fighting a lone battle against corruption and oligarchs. During the last year Zelenskiy has responded to questions about running in the elections in an evasive manner, but at the same time he has registered a political party under the name *Servant of the Nation*, and has held confidential consultations with specialists on economy and security matters.

Commentary

- Zelenskiy's high support results not only from his media activity, but also from the Ukrainian people's distrust in politicians and the establishment, as well as the voters' readiness to cast their votes for so-called 'new faces'. In addition, voters are attracted by the fact that Zelenskiy has been successful in business and finance and has not been involved in moral or corruption scandals. Although his political and economic ignorance has emerged from the few statements he has made, some voters do not see this as a flaw. Both the content of his television programmes and statements indicate that he appeals to the so-called ordinary people, mainly Russian speakers from the east and south of the country, who are tired of the war and the reform programme. Zelenskiy has criticised the de-Communisation process, uses the Russian language almost exclusively and is reluctant to use Ukrainian, and has proposed that the most important decisions be taken through referenda. Asked about relations with Russia, he has openly condemned the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, but at the same time considers that the best prescription for a quick end to the war in the east lies in making a compromise

with Putin during direct talks.

- Although previous polls have given Zelenskiy support of about 9-11%, and placed him second in the race behind Yulia Tymoshenko, several factors limit his chances of winning the ultimate prize: (1) his candidacy is supported by younger voters, who are less likely to turn out; (2) in the second round, the citizens of Ukraine will be choosing not only a president but also a commander-in-chief, and the balance may be tilted in favour of a more experienced politician; (3) the majority of Ukrainians are convinced that Tymoshenko or Poroshenko will win in the elections; 4) Zelenskiy does not have any support structures in the regions.
- Zelenskiy has worked closely with the oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskiy for several years. Kolomoyskiy is the main opponent of Petro Poroshenko, and has been seeking revenge for the revenues his businesses have lost by supporting the main candidates for the presidency, namely Tymoshenko, and now Zelenskiy. The oligarch assumes that a good result for Zelenskiy in the presidential elections will help him to send a large group of deputies to parliament in the elections in October and expand his influence in the country.