

Everything is possible: Ukraine two months before the presidential election

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4 February was the deadline for candidates in the presidential elections scheduled for 31 March to submit their applications to the Central Election Commission. The three favourites are: comedian and television producer Volodymyr Zelenskiy, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, and the incumbent president Petro Poroshenko. According to the latest reliable poll in January (by the Rating Group), Zelenskiy has moved into the lead with 19% support, slightly ahead of Tymoshenko (18%) while Poroshenko has recovered some of his losses to the leaders (15%). Although many of the published polls are elements of the various campaigns' strategy to convince voters to support their candidate, rather than reliable assessments of electoral preferences, it seems clear that the election will be decided in the second round (21 April) between these three main contenders; the rest of the candidates no longer have any real chances. This is a situation without precedent, as in previous elections the line-up of the second round has been clear long before the voting day. Nor has there ever been a situation where the greatest support has been enjoyed by a non-professional politician.

The upcoming presidential elections are a game with high stakes. Their outcome will affect the results of each party taking part in the parliamentary elections scheduled for 27 October. This is why most of the more than thirty registered candidates are taking part in the elections on 31 March; they are only interested in improving their ratings before the autumn elections to the *Verkhovna Rada*. Both elections will shape the personnel of Ukraine's politics over the next years and determine the direction of the country's development; however, none of the favourites will guarantee the systemic reforms that would break the oligarchic model of development and signify a real fight against corruption.

Politics as a TV series

Until recently, Volodymyr Zelenskiy had not been seen as a serious contender in the election. However, since he announced on New Year's Eve that he would run, his support has risen considerably. The source of his popularity is that he does not belong to the establishment, and has been conducting an unorthodox election campaign. Zelenskiy communicates with voters by using social media and holding concerts in Ukraine's regional centres, while the TV series and cabaret shows in which he stars are among the most popular in Ukraine. It is partly for these reasons that his popularity has not been affected by previous criticism of his brusque treatment of journalists, or the fact that he concealed

shares in a company registered in Cyprus which accumulated his royalties from the Russian market.

His views on the most important issues are unclear, and the opinions he has shared in the few interviews he has given have been met with derision in expert circles. Zelenskiy's election campaign is targeted primarily against Petro Poroshenko, and its aim is to prevent him from making it to the second round. Zelenskiy's ties to Ihor Kolomoyskiy, an oligarch who has been in conflict with president, are open; but Kolomoyskiy has also supported Yulia Tymoshenko. However, the true nature of these relationships is difficult to grasp. By conducting an unobtrusive, witty campaign which appeals to voters who want new faces in politics and are tired of the current political class and its reforms, Zelenskiy well fits the role of a centrist, anti-establishment candidate who could be accepted by a large part of the voters.

Tymoshenko: now or never

The twice former prime minister of Ukraine was the first of the major candidates to begin an active campaign, which allowed her to mobilise her electorate quickly. However, attempts to broaden her appeal have failed; the rallies she held in major Ukrainian cities, in which she was presented as a modern manager, were considered to be implausible. The level of support for Tymoshenko has remained relatively stable since last summer (17-21%), and so in the absence (at least at this stage) of any new slogans to support her programme, she has focused on promises to reduce gas prices by half, improve the level of education and expand access to medicine, as well as slogans about a new social contract and changes to the constitution. In her campaign, Tymoshenko has been particularly critical of the incumbent president, accusing him of corruption, and more recently of planning to bribe voters on a massive scale. Her lack of criticism towards Zelenskiy may result from both some kind of deal with Kolomoyskiy, and also from the conviction that ultimately the comedian has no chance of winning outright.

Poroshenko: uncertain re-election

The incumbent president was the last of the favourites to file his documents with the CEC. He did so in order to dismiss allegations that his 'tomos tour' of recent weeks, during which he has been visiting largest Ukrainian cities along with the highest dignitaries of the newly formed Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the original version of the tomos (the document granting autocephaly), is just a part of his election campaign. Obtaining canonical independence for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been an unquestionable success for the president, thanks to which he has pulled back a few percentage points on the poll leaders; since last summer it has been the focus of Poroshenko's election message. His rhetoric has been based on a simplified dichotomy according to which the incumbent president is the only guarantee that Ukraine will break its ties with an aggressive Russia and tighten its integration with the West, and that the other candidates are Kremlin 'agents' to greater or lesser degrees. In the near future, this image will be confirmed by the introduction of changes to the constitution guaranteeing Ukraine's aspirations to join the EU and NATO. Meanwhile, early March will see the test payments of subsidies (in cash) to around 6

million households (as compensation for the increases in municipal fees imposed by the IMF), which is intended to motivate the more socially-oriented electorate to vote for Poroshenko. Although the president has a broader scope than the other candidates to influence society, he has been weighed down by the ballast of greater responsibility for the unimplemented reforms and corruption scandals for just the same reasons. This factor is the source of his highest negative poll rating (c. 50%).

Pre-election forecasts

Opinion polls show that almost 80% of Ukrainian citizens have declared that they will participate in the elections. The relatively low support for the main contenders, the lack of a clear leader, as well as the low overall level of trust in politicians means that the elections will only be decided between Zelenskiy, Tymoshenko and Poroshenko in the second round. According to simulations, Poroshenko would lose in the second round to either Zelenskiy or Tymoshenko, and Zelenskiy would beat both the former prime minister and the current president. Whatever the outcome, though, none of the favourites will guarantee the introduction of systemic reforms or the modernisation of the state. Poroshenko and Tymoshenko are experienced politicians; their views on foreign policy may vary (Tymoshenko is not as categorical as Poroshenko on the issue of Ukraine's pro-Western orientation), as may details of their political or economic ideas, but mentally they are unable to change the current model. On the other hand Zelenskiy, who is perceived by some disillusioned voters as the promise of such a change, would not be able to carry it out due to his lack of experience and his personnel base, as well as his probable links with the oligarch Kolomoyskiy. The coming weeks will indeed test the effectiveness of his campaign, and will show whether the level of support for him is maintained. Being the favourite means that the number of attacks on him will rise, the more so as the intellectual, political and business elites are increasingly appear afraid that a man may be chosen for the highest office whose views on key spheres of the state's operation are unclear, or are merely a stopgap for the duration of the election campaign. A rise in such sentiments could increase the chances for the incumbent president, who in this context would embody order and stability.