

## Election in Ukraine: Zelenskiy is closer to the presidency

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The first round of the presidential elections was held on 31 March in Ukraine. The results of exit polls conducted by both TV stations and a consortium of public opinion research centres (the so-called 'national exit poll') indicated that **the first round had been won by the comedian Volodymyr Zelenskiy, while the incumbent president Petro Poroshenko achieved the second-best result**. The two candidates will continue the presidential race until the runoff is held in three weeks' time.

According to the national exit poll, Zelenskiy garnered 30.6% of the votes, and Poroshenko 17.8%. Former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko came third, with 14.2% support. This data can be viewed as reliable because it is similar to the results of other exit polls and some of the public opinion surveys conducted during the week preceding the election. By 1 pm on 2 April, the Ukrainian Central Election Committee had processed data from 99% of the reports compiled at the polling stations. According to this data the main candidates achieved the following levels of support: Volodymyr Zelenskiy 30.23%, Petro Poroshenko 1.91%, Yulia Tymoshenko 13.39%, Yuriy Boyko 11.68%, Anatoliy Hrytsenko 6.92%, and Ihor Smeshko 6.03%.

**The vote was held in a peaceful manner without any disruption.** Some minor incidents have so far been reported at a dozen or so election commissions, but they will not affect the final result. Thus the fears that incidents might erupt at polling stations on a massive scale on election night, attempts to disrupt the elections would be made and that the software of the Central Election Committee would be hacked proved groundless. Turnout reached 63.48%, and the election was monitored by over two thousand foreign observers.

### Commentary

- **The good result achieved by Zelenskiy makes him the very likely winner of the runoff.** The results show that his electorate decided to become actively involved in the election, and that the levels of support for him had been slightly underestimated in the previous public opinion polls. Zelenskiy garnered the highest support in the southern (42%), eastern (30.7%) and central parts of the country (28.6%) (according to the 'national exit poll') and benefited from high voter turnout, both nationwide and in the constituencies in the south and east of the country which are traditionally less active in elections. Zelenskiy also capitalised on the fact that the Ukrainian public is tired of the entire political class and the costs of the inconsistent reforms. **The election gave Zelenskiy's supporters an opportunity to 'count themselves', and the good result achieved during**

the first round has made it clear to his electorate that a vote cast for the comedian is not wasted.

- **Poroshenko's result, which will allow him to take part in the runoff, needs to be viewed as a success for him.** The serious corruption scandals involving his closest aides, which were brought to light weeks ahead of the election, did not prevent him from beating his greatest rival in the first round, Yulia Tymoshenko. This was possible owing to the mobilisation of the patriotically inclined electorate who fear Zelenskiy's presidency. **At the same time, it should be noted that Poroshenko's result (almost 16%) is very modest, given the challenges he will have to face ahead of the second round. For this reason it is highly unlikely that he will be re-elected on 21 April.** The difference in support for the incumbent president and Zelenskiy is significant, and Poroshenko has the highest negative rating of all the candidates; half of voters claim that they will not vote for him under any circumstances (while Zelenskiy's negative rating is the lowest). It should be expected that most of the people who voted for the candidates who garnered lower support, including Yulia Tymoshenko and Yuriy Boyko, will not back Poroshenko.
- This is Tymoshenko's third defeat in the presidential race. She is the only one to have rejected the exit poll results, presenting her own calculations according to which she placed second. **It can be expected that initially she will not recognise the official results and will mobilise her supporters to take part in street protests against Poroshenko, but these demonstrations will not be massive.** Her goal is to help mobilise her supporters before the parliamentary elections scheduled for 27 October, and the 'lie of 31 March' will serve as major fuel for her election campaign. Tymoshenko has a chance of bringing a significant number of deputies to parliament in the autumn election. It seems that she will make efforts to strike a deal with Zelenskiy, including forging a government coalition with his grouping.
- The three weeks of the election campaign preceding the runoff will be full of mutual accusations and brutal attacks on opponents. A foretaste of this could already be sensed in the speeches Poroshenko and Zelenskiy made after the announcement of the exit poll results. The president accused his opponent of being 'a puppet of [Ihor] Kolomoyskiy' (an oligarch who is at odds with Poroshenko and who backs Zelenskiy), and invited him to take part in a debate ahead of the second round. In turn, the actor accused the president of backing his closest aides in their corruption practices.
- It is unlikely that Zelenskiy will take part in a public election debate with Poroshenko because this would be a highly risky move for him. Given his poor command of Ukrainian (he usually speaks Russian) and the serious gaps in his knowledge of domestic and foreign policy and the functioning of the state, Zelenskiy would perform much worse than the incumbent president, who is a seasoned politician and a good orator. Thus the lack of a direct confrontation of the two candidates in a debate, participation in which is not a legal requirement, will seriously reduce Poroshenko's chances of re-election.
- In the period preceding the runoff, Poroshenko will mainly focus on running a negative campaign, with the intention to convince the public that Zelenskiy is not competent to serve as the head of state. The president and his staff will argue that in a situation where the country is at war with Russia, entrusting a comedian, a person who has no experience

in politics and state administration, with the position of commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian army is an irresponsible move. Furthermore, Zelenskiy's links with Kolomoyskiy will be emphasised and exaggerated to undermine his image as a 'new face', someone outside the political establishment, as will his Russian connections: Zelenskiy owns a production firm operating on the Russian market and a villa on the Italian sea coast located close to properties owned by Russian oligarchs. New stories are also likely to appear which will be aimed at discrediting Zelenskiy by presenting him as a 'collaborator with the aggressor'. However these moves will only have a limited effect, unless new and irrefutable information showing him in a bad light is presented.

- Zelenskiy for his part will draw attention to the corruption scandals in Poroshenko's inner circle and his lack of success in reforming the country. The style of his campaign will be the same as before the first round: occasional live shows in the media, intensive communication with voters in social media and during concerts, and cautiously getting voters 'accustomed' to Zelenskiy's new role. One such move, which he had already promised before the first round, will be to announce the names of his future closest aides. The following politicians, who are perceived as supporters of bold reforms, have been seen in the actor's company: Aivaras Abromavičius (a Lithuanian economist who has lived for a long time in Kyiv, and who served as the minister for economic development and trade for Ukraine in 2014–16), Oleksandr Danylyuk (who served as Ukraine's finance minister in 2016–18, and is an advocate of close co-operation with the International Monetary Fund and a thorough reform of public finances) and Serhiy Leshchenko (who worked for many years as an investigative journalist for the *Ukrayinska Pravda* website, is an anti-corruption activist and a member of the Ukrainian parliament). It is very likely that they will be officially presented as members of Zelenskiy's team, which will enable him to portray himself as a reliable politician who is capable of coping with the challenges Ukraine is facing.